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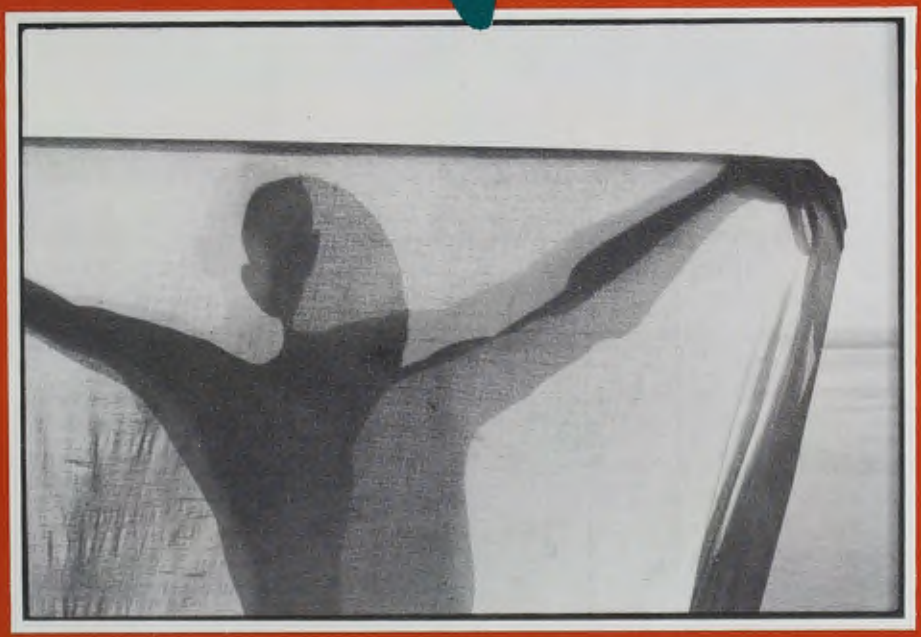

FEATURING: SAPPHO ON EAST SEVENTH BY ED SANDERS
PROSE AND POETRY BY EDMOND JABES
FUNDAMENTAL STONE BY ALEJANDRA PIZARNIK
CROWBAR BY RACHEL BLAU DUPLESSIS

Twelve Poems by Robert Creeley

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1984

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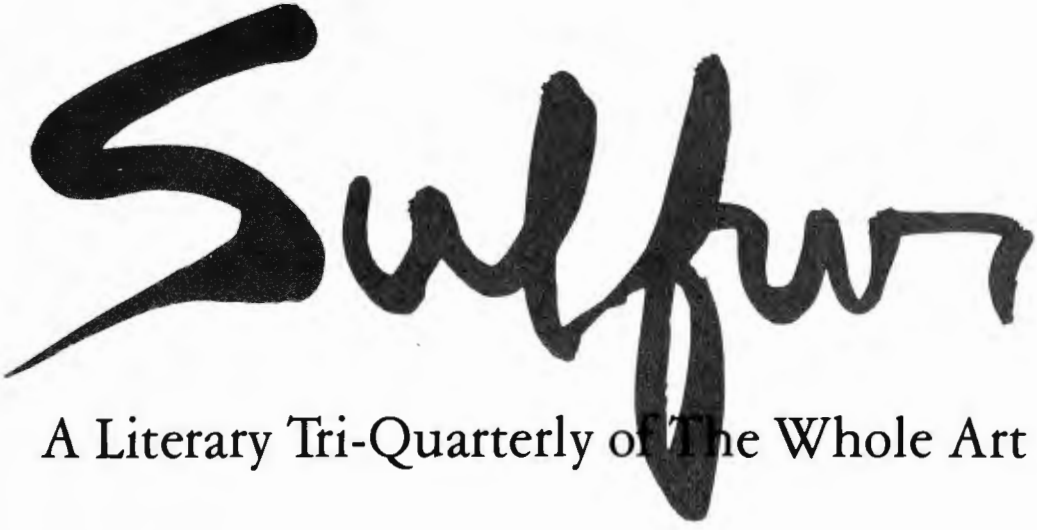

A Literary Tri-Quarterly of The Whole Art

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William Everson

Two Poems

DANSE MACABRE

The place is public—a thronged station
Or perhaps the lobby of a large hotel.
Someone I know approaches, friend or acquaintance,
Dimly recalled but not clearly seen, his line of advance
Tangent to my own.

Who?

I will know him later for my very self,
That heron-like hunch of my Waldport years, but now
Unrecognized. No face and no name,
Nor has he yet noticed me.

I step aside,
Averting my gaze, and quicken my pace.
It is this evasion that sets me directly on course
Toward a man and woman sitting casually by.
Turning my head I make to deflect again,
But before I can follow, the woman, rising,
Steps into my path. She will not be put off.

I check my stride. As I do

She lifts her head, hooded, the cowl
Framing her face.

No face—a gaping skull.
Not bones dry from the tomb,
Rather, bluish white, glistening, tatters of flesh
Still clinging her jaws—butcher's bones
Housewives lug home for dog-gnaw.

Taken aback
I half turn aside, but before I can dodge
She slips away, off toward the man,
Laughing, her face hidden now,
But her voice provocative.

Suddenly I seize her.
Under the cloak she is supple and firm.
Pulsing with life. I pull her to me,
Amorous, crushing her in my arms
While she laughs and struggles.

I jerk awake.
I am clasping the recumbent body of my wife.
She is fast asleep, face from me,
And I press against her.

Sensing arousal
She stirs her hips, languidly, still deeply asleep,
Too lost in the wonder of her own myth
To waken to mine.

And I lie listening,
Harkening to the changing rhythm of my life,
The hope in the horror of the yet-to-be:
What the dream denotes.

As the tolling bell

Sounds in its knell the certitude of deliverance
From the sorrow it extols, so the eternal,
Haunting the instances of mutilation,
Chimes the measure of the unconceived.

REAPER

Winter's wake: week after week the sopping northwesters
Soaked the coast. When May, bedraggled, finally limped in,
The liberated sun sent the grass knee-high
And thick as cat's fur. Taking up the scythe put by last summer
I started to mow.

This morning, honing the blade,
A spasm shook me—the Parkinson's reflex.
Struggling for balance I stumbled, fell forward,
Dropping scythe and hone to free my hands and break my fall.
But the crooked stock counterbalanced the blade,
Cat-quick, flipped the long point up and back.
Steel struck my face as I fell on it,
Drove into my cheek along the jaw,
And stuck there. Down on my knees I struggled with it,
And when it fell free, blood gushed from the gash,
Drenching my beard.

I staggered indoors,
Raining red on the floor, and yelled to my wife,
"Susanna! Come quick! I fell on my scythe!"
Who came wondering from the bedroom,
"Fell on your side?" then spotted the blood and ran to me.
Wrapping a towel round my lacerated jaw

She got me to the car and into town before I could snarl.
But when I badmouthed my lot the doctor would have none of it:
"Count your blessings, man. It was very close.
A little to the left and a bit lower down
Would have split your mouth and slit your throat.
Consider yourself in luck."

Back home, luckily unlucky,
I regard my image in the looking glass
And say to myself: What a way to go!
The mad scythe, cutting the firebreak ten years back,
All the women in your life laid low with the flowers,
Now turns on you. Drunk in death
Would you hug them to your heart?
The world at large would receive your demise
With grave satisfaction, struck by its wry fitness,
Sensing a kind of rough justice.
The karmic violence that never quits,
The howling Erinyes pursuing vengeance
Down the rooftree of the world.

It is not so.
Not yet anyway. In the springtime dusk
I feel no fear, and I whisper,
"Death, you darling! Come quick if you love me!
Tease me not brazen hussy! Think rather
We have pledged our troth in violent verse
And not flinched."

Today you kissed me
Almost on the mouth. I know by this
You have prepared the place, readied the bed,
Where breast to breast we will slake desire
Each of the other, and leave this life
Enjoined.

Ed Sanders

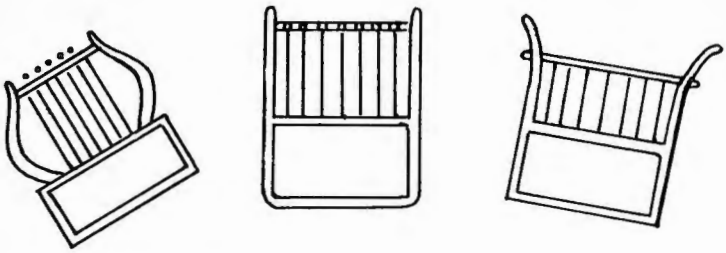
SAPPHO ON EAST SEVENTH

(Poet John Barrett is a graduate student in the classics department at New York University. His obsession is Sappho. There are drawings of her likeness on the wall, as well as photostats of fragments of her poems found in papier-mâché coffins in Oxyrhynchus, Egypt. Barrett's translations of her poems are given prominent display above his desk, and the living room has been converted into a work shop for the construction of an ancient four-string lyre with a sounding box fashioned from the carapace of a European tortoise. He's managed to acquire about a dozen shells. They're all over the pad—tortoise shells on milk crate book shelves used by his friends as ash trays. He eats his morning oatmeal out of a shell. The time is late summer, 1963. The place East 7th Street near Avenue A.)

He had an obsession for Sappho
He lived inside her meters
like a trout in running mirth

He was building a four-string lyre
to sing Sappho down
Sappho come down

He copied lyres
from the Parthenon frieze
looking for the perfect shape



There were tortoise shells
hanging by nails
on the wall
Another lay on his desk
near scraping tools, a saw,
a pot of glue,
some whittling knives
from H.L. Wild.
The Lyre
transformed him—
in the mode of the
Dada masks
transforming the shy young poets
in the Zurich cabaret.*

Barrett became Some Other Bard
striding through his rooms
holding his lyre
singing with all the passion to summon:

"There is a river
in Mitylene
where Sappho

*Referring to the Cabaret Voltaire of 1916 and the spontaneous poem and dance performances inspired by the donning of Marcel Janco's famous masks.

used to swim
with a friend

dropping their sandals
with ivory inlay
at the water's bank

I saw Sappho
bending in the foam
peplos-less and chiton free
on a summer's day

singing a song
that is lost

They later lay
in the
creekside glade

soothing each other's
skin
with oil & caresses

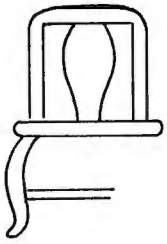
singing a song
that is lost

o Sappho come down
Sappho come down."

A friend from school,
Consuela,
lived next door
and heard John Barrett's prayer
through the tenement wall

Goat horns
were hard to get
on the Lower East Side

so he carved the arms
from the legs
of an arm chair
found in the street



and a thin rounded sounding board
cut he (from a spruce wood shingle)
to fit
on the shell

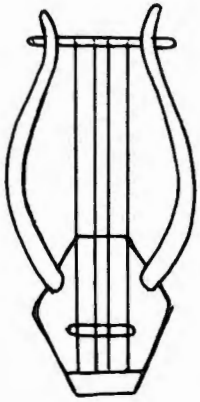
The cross bar from arm to arm
had tuning pegs from
an antique broken banjo
found in the trash
of a burned out store

A bridge he
shaped & notched
from an ebony comb

and when he had built one
with which he could sing
he scribed it with Sappho's

Ἄγε δῖα χέλυννα μοι
φωνάεσσά τε γίγνεο

"Come my sacred lyre
make yourself sing"



She listened each night
to dig what it was
and finally understood

when Barrett Sang:

"as a glider
swoops down
from the cliffs

over the birchen hills

swoop thou down oh
Sapph' swoop down"

She lay in bed
with her ear
to the wall

spiss-hissing with held back laughs.

She mocked him:

"as a cornflake
though the
subway grate

into the

bubble gum
muck

settle thou down
Sapph' settle down"

The next day she told her Greek class
Together they plotted a trick

One night she would
appear on the fire escape
she shared with Barrett
—attired in chiton and peplos*
and sing/chant some Sappho

as if she were Sappho's geist

She bought a bolt of white linen
on Orchard Street
and brocade for the edges
of Ukrainian symbology
at Surma on 7th
& sewed herself Sapphic attire

She memorized the Hymn to Aphrodite,
Consuela,
to sing Sappho down
Sappho come down

It was late afternoon when she
came from the shower, donned the chiton
and peplos overgarment,

*The basic attire of ancient Greece, both garments being fashioned from oblong pieces of cloth. The chiton was a tunic of linen or wool worn next to the skin, doubling around the body. It was pinned over each shoulder, and held at the waist by belt or cincture. The peplos was a heavier cloak-like overgarment.

crawled upon the window sill, shoved
aside her boxes of flowers

—she knew it was the hour that
Barrett would sing—

and crouched upon the gritty
black ironwork
blistered and pitted
from 20 coats in 90 years.

When she heard Barrett's loud
prayer begin and the strings
of his lyre resound, she

stood to sing—Consuela
saw the air above the fire escape
come apart—as if some giant hand
had scissored a line
in reality's tarp

There was a chirping of birds
and dim dots clouding the view.
Through the pointilliste gray
an arm was thrust,
holding a lyre,
then another arm—
the fist of it clenched

then opened, and tiny kernals
fell upon the grate
of the fire escape
to rain on the courtyard below

Consuela sank in awe,
the rungs of the fire escape
streaking her knees with grit-gray stripes

while Sappho's body
seemed to float
through the tarp-warp gap

the very second Barrett's
edge-of-frenzy voice
sang

"Sappho come down
come down Sapph'!"

At first John Barrett
tried to
gaze at the apparition
with an "it's about time" expression

Then, "Sappho!" he gasped,
for actually
Barrett had little trust
in the summoning power
of a lyre with arms
from a scrounged chair
and a tremulous voice
more like a dare

He glanced about his dis-
hevelled beatnik apartment
and wished he had cleaned away
the bottles from the night before

Sappho picked up his lyre
from the desk
setting her own aside
and started to sing

ΨΑΠΦΟΥΣ ΜΗΛΗ

ποικιλόθρον' ἀθανατ' Ἀφρόδιτα,
παῖ Διός δολόπλοκε, λίσσομαί σε
μή μ' ἄσαισι μηδ' ὀνίαισι δάμνα,
πότνια, θῦμον,

ἀλλά, τάιδ' ἔλθ', αἴ ποκα κἀτέρωτα
τᾶς ἐμᾶς αὔδας αἴοισα πάρος τᾶι
ἔκλυες, πατρὸς δὲ δόμον λίποισα
χρύσιον ἦλθες

ἄρμ' ὑπασδεύξαισα· κάλοι δέ σ' ἆγον
ὠκέες στροῦθοι περὶ γᾶς μελαίνας
πύκνα δίννεντες πτέρ' ἀπ' ὠράνωθεν
ῥῶσσα διάπτα·

αἶψα δ' ἐξίκοντο. σὺ δ', ὦ μακαίρα
μειδιαίσαισ' ἀθανάτωι προσώπωι
ἤρε' ὄττι δηὖτε πέπονθα κὤττι
δηὖτε καλημμι

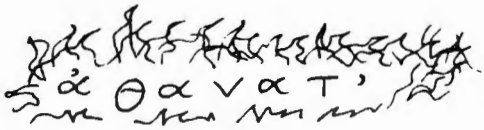
κὤττι μοι μάλιστα θέλω γένεσθαι
μαινόλαι θύμωι· τίνα δηὖτε πείθαι
σαγήνηι ἐς σὰν φιλότατα; τίς σ', ὦ
Ψάπφ' ἀδικήει;

καὶ γὰρ αἰ φεύγει, ταχέως διώξει·
αἰ δὲ δῶρα μὴ δέκετ', ἀλλὰ δώσει·
αἰ δὲ μὴ φίλει, ταχέως φιλήσει
κούκ ἐθέλοισα.

ἔλθε μοι καὶ νῦν, χαλέπαν δ' ἀπύσαι
ἐκ μερίμναν, ὅσσα δέ μοι τέλεσσαι
θῦμος ἰμέρρει, τέλεσον, σὺ δ' αὔτα
σύμμαχος ἔσσο.

He could *see*
the words she sang
above her
with a throbbing life of their own

Words of Water



Words of Fire

Words of Broken Oars

When the song was over
Barrett stood stunned
tears on his cheek

sinuses cloggy, vision blurred,
ache of love in his stomach.

Then she walked to the wall
where he'd pinned
his translations

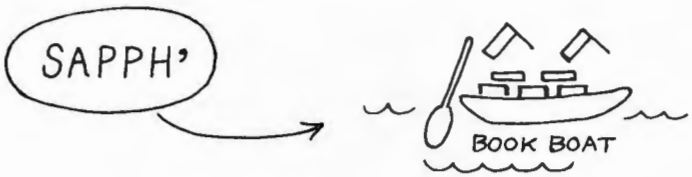
He tried not to glance
at her breasts
just as he did not look

in Stanley's Bar
on a midriff summer night

The bosom
of a ghost
is not for the kisses
of eyes.

Barrett was horrified
to see Sappho stand
reading her verses' versions
It was hard to keep from
ripping them down.
Finally, she turned away, & laughed,
"Better than Byron's—
at least."

Next she visited his shelves
"Let me gaze upon your
Book Boat," she said



Oh, no!
thought John Barrett,
worrying about the many marginal tomes
in his Book Boat
The gibberish of friends,
the smut, the
mal-marked scholarship.

Sang then Sapph':

"There is a boat
for every bard
bobbing in the waves
a Boat of Books

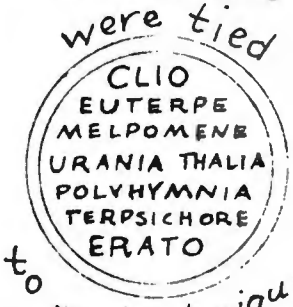
Some will say
to build a boat of death
Others will sing
a trimaran of green

But a bard
had better build
a Boat of Books

for the troublesome
flow.

And you shall find
a Muse for your age
in the Book Boat prow:

Retentia
Muse of the Retained Image.

The pan pipes
the seven-string lyre
the arsis & thesis—
The muses
with which I sang
were tied


to my techniques
but yours is the era
of captured sunlight
& oxide-dappled tape

Retentia
catches the beauteous flow
swifter than a cricket's foot

The photos taped to your wall
of my poems' shreds
were wrought by
Retentia

She rushes to the aid of groaning Clio
whose scrolls lie thickened & black

She helps you to sort
to soothe
to winnow

as well as to keep
to save
to shape.

The Image is safe
with Retentia
for a million years
till the pulsing fires
which scorch all lyres

O

Once on an
incurved hillock
near Mitylene
a circle of maidens sang
—Alcaeus was there

if only
if only
I could hear
their image again!"

Sappho stopped singing
There was a near-sob tremble
in her voice

"Pray to Retentia, John Barrett,
for each muse aids
in her measure
and the task
is to know
the mix of the muses' gifts
in your lines."

She moved her hand to the wall
to touch the photostated papyrus
The wall cleaved apart
and forth stepped Retentia
in a blue-black gown
crackling on its surface with

tiny jiggle-jaggles of lightning
which seemed to form
almost a lightning lace
above the blue-black weave

Barrett was wondering
what sort of prayer
was proper to utter

in praise of a new muse
standing in his room
from the Book Boat prow

He was foolishly thinking
of scooping the floor
to kiss Retentia's hem

when Sappho walked to the kitchen cupboard
and opened the doors

"What does she want?" Barrett asked himself.
"I don't have any Methu," he said,
inwardly praising himself for his wit.

(Methu was a famous
wine produced
in ancient Lesbos)

"Have you no herb scented oils?"
she spoke in complaint,
shutting the cupboard doors—

"How frailly you fail
in matters of love
& longing," she said

"How can you think
a woman like Louise

would love you,
knowing what you know?"

She entered Barrett's bedroom,
a tawdry chamber
with its mattress
on the floor
mid candle spatters

and a blue print of Sappho's
face, large as the wall,
above the bed

"Now you shall learn
the Rubbing of Oils
& Glossa Didacta."
Retentia
appeared at the door
bearing a tray of
tiny canopic jars

—oils & unguents
with which Sapph'
could ply her hands

as she slid the
clothing from shy John Barrett's
skinny frame
& rubbed him thrillsomely
from jar upon jar
each oil having
a different thrill
—a mild sting here
and a tremble there—

& sweet smells
mxing with
smells piquant

"There is much you do not
know,"
spoke she,
neatly hanging her peplos
upon a nail on the door
after she had shut it

She drew Barrett down
O Barrett come down

"We have called it
the Glossa Didacta
and every bard must have
its perfect knowledge"

Down sank they
upon J. Barrett's mattress

She pulled his poorly combed
badly washed curls
down upon the only thing substantial

It was like a softened rosehip
The rest of her was ghost-mist

"Your head is the rudder
& I shall steer it over
the rapids,"
this way
that way
steering with fondly grabbed ears
steering the rose bud
steering the bard boy's brow

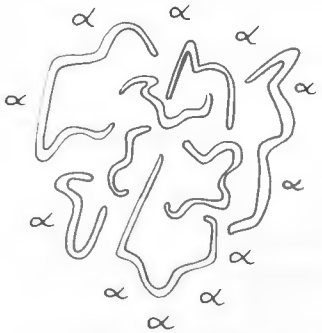
showing him pressures
motions
patterns

"That's it
That's the way
That's perfect"

clitoris bifurcated
like

a
lithops
(left side to the right brain
right side to the left brain?
twain
bundle
of come-nerves?)

She came in words arcane,
Sapph'-sighs writhing above her
in jumbles of
hieroglyphic neon,
as when she had sung—



She spoke to him in Latin,
"Now I have taught you
the Lingus Didacticus
and those you coax
into its trembly thrall
shall know a dance more lightly tapped
than the meters of Euripides."

Then she bade him
come inside her.

"Don't you make it only with, uh, gunaikes?"
he replied, breaking into Greek.

She'd arranged chianti bottles
around the bed
with flickering candles within

Barrett looked up
to see the shadow
of the ghost
against her blueprint image
on the wall
as she tugged him gently
but insistently
till they lay
face to face
& she guided him up & within—

an hour
to make him
believe anew in the
thought of the Numen

or an hour
as a catalpa blossom

floating in the River Thrill.

Ahh, côte-à-côte
he longed to lie
with her
upon the dawn—

"Stand up," she said instead,
"We're going on a journey."

"If so," replied John Barrett,
"give me satyr legs!
yes, sturdy hairy legs
& hircine hooves
to spring and leap!"

Sappho smiled, but
could not comply.
She held his hand
& floated
from the room on East 7th

above the green copse of
Tompkins Park

dizzily dizzily
whirling a further era back—

to 1911
where Emma Hardy sat alone
on a spring morn
at Max Gate*
her husband downstairs

*Max Gate—Thomas & Emma Hardy's house in East Dorset, Dorchester. In 1908 Emma had ordered dormer windows built in her attic boudoir, outside of which the birds at the feeding table would flock to eat from her hands.

correcting
proofs
with his mistress.

They entered Emma's bedroom
through the dormer windows
There was a feeding station
by the sill
for the birds

Sappho felt pity
for bitter Emma Hardy
whose husband's hands

were ever poised
to trace the
curves of youth.

She was trying
to ready herself
for the day

but her face
was twisted in pain
from a torturing back

The pain was too consuming
for her to lift
a plate of crusts
to the birds

She rang for her helper, Dolly Gale,
to brush her hair
Dolly stood behind her
unbraiding untangling uncoiling
the sleep jammed tresses

The slightest tug
of the bristles
brought agony's gasp

till Sappho reached out
to place a soothing palm
on Emma's spine

to ease away
the axing ache

"The oil, John, the oil," Sapph' urged
and John Barrett parted the robe
from the painéd shoulders
and began to caress
with Mytilene's finest
from a thin necked jar

The peace in her back
brought the first smile
in months

"Call the birds for us, please Emma?"
Sappho asked, and Emma Hardy
walked to the sill
and raised her hands

Emma was 68
Emma in pain
Emma threw open the dormer
to fee them her wedding train

There must have been a hundred bird
in a wild gustation of feathery blurrs
above the feeding station
pecking the breakfast crumbs

"This house Hardy built," Sappho said to
John, with a tone of disgust,

"without a hot
water tub!"

She took his hand again—"Prepare for a trip
to 642 A.D."

There was a further whirling
after which
they alighted
at a site of steam & fire

Barrett thought for a moment
they might have followed
Dante and Vergil
into a bolge of hell

There was a hairless man
with a shiny skull
& a missing tooth in front

throwing bundles of papyrus
scrolls
into the wordeating mouth
of an open hearthed ceramic furnace

Water boils above it
in a large copper basin,
feeding through ducts to a
series of copper tanks
of varying stages of heat
so that a bather in
the pool can tug a string
for the heat of her choice.

Stacks of scrolls

jut this way and that.
Barrett cranes his head
to read the names
upon the next thatch
to be tossed

Oh, no! It takes a few seconds
reading the run-on script
for John to recognize
the plays of Aeschylus!

They are heating the baths of
Alexandria
with the last of the ancient
libraries

"Look!" she cried, "Do you know what that is?"
The attendant had an armload of volumes*
with projecting knobs. "He's just about to burn
the final set of my collected works."

The fireman
tossed them two by two in the fameless flame

Barrett tried to grab them
but his hands brushed through
like mist into a redwood bough

"Some of my poems were
torched by Caesar
burning the ships
in Alexandria's bay
& the fire reached ashore

*Volume, from volumen, papyrus rolled around a stick or sticks, the text written in narrow columns.

Some were chopped into
papier-mâché for
middle class coffins of Thebes

Some were destroyed
when surly Christians
sacked the Serapeum*
in 391

And now it is time
for ashes and chars
to come to the
mixolydian mode

Some poets' words
are written on water
Others make flame
to make it moil."

Just then
the voices of women
& the clack of clogs
were heard

The daughters of General Amrou**
had come to soak
in the steam-topped pool
& to smooth
with pumic bars and strigils***
their steam-soft skin

---

* one of the two ancient archives in Alexandria

** Amrou seized Alexandria for the caliph Omar in 642. The latter, it is said, ordered the remaining books in the ancient library destroyed on the grounds that now that the Koran had been written, they were no longer needed.

*** curved scrapers for removing bath softened skin.

The women
passed their towels
to their servants

and the high-domed room
was soon resounding
with laughter and aqueous splash

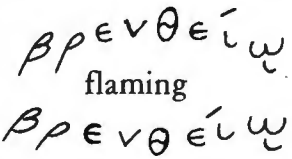
All of a sudden Sapph' shoved past
the sweaty man by the furnace
and gathered the final rolls,
to Barrett's gasp,
and flicked them into the rage

She turned, disrobed
handed her chiton to
Barrett
and slid into the water
to sit on a marble plank
with the damozels
in the moil pool's midst

"Hotter, hotter," she urged
the attendant, tugging on the rope
to empty a torrid tank
upon them

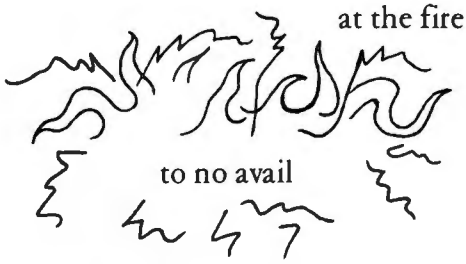
while out of the furnace
a burning fragment fluttered

just a corner of paper,
curling & burning
with Sappho's last word



flaming

It fell at Barrett's feet
He tried to stamp
at the fire



to no avail

A silver knob
from the end of a scroll stick,
worked in a pattern of porpoises,
rolled out of the furnace
all that remained
of the works
of Sappho of Mitylene

Barrett reached down to seize it
He slipped
& smashed to the floor.

He came awake
in his pad on East 7th
and saw a foot on
the fire escape.

"Sappho!" he half screamed,
and rushed to the window

but it was Consuela
in her Orchard St. chiton and peplos

She seemed asleep
but opened her eyes at once
when he touched her

She told him her tale
He told her his

showed her
the silver knob
and the smell of the top of his wrist
still thrillsome
with Sappho's oil.

Afraid, yet
unable not, to
talk about
it

Barrett told portions
to some, &
the whole event
to a few
with the silver knob
as carefully shown
as a saint's bone.

To some
he was
Crazy John

("You sure this wasn't
the head from your

grandfather's cane?"
Sam Thomas sneered)

To others
he was
Lucky Bard

(to carve the proper lyre
to sing Sappho down
Sappho come down)

Though he sang her each eve
he saw her no more
till later that year
on a snowy night

John saw Sappho
her neck laden
with heavy
Russian crosses

praying in the deep drift snow
on Avenue A

before it was disturbed
by salt & sweep

outside the redbrick
St. Nicholas
Carpatho Russian
church

Icons were
melting in
her hands

& rubies
dropped

from her
crusted neck
into the snow

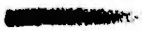
(though later
they vanished)

He ran to see her
She was weeping

"You'll cry too,"
was all that she said

& she walked
away into the blizzard
weeping & wailing

& Barrett
never saw her again.



Charles Bernstein

DYSRAPHISM

Did a wind come just as you got up or were
you protecting me from it? I felt the abridgement
of imperatives, the wave of detours, the sabre–
rattling of inversion. *All lit up and no*
place to go. Blinded by avenue and filled with
adjacency. Arch or arched at. So there becomes bottles,
hushed conductors, illustrated proclivities for puffed–
up benchmarks. Morose or comatose. "Life is what
you find, existence is what you repudiate." A good example
of this is 'Dad pins puck.' Sometimes something
sunders; in most cases, this is no more than a hall.
No where to go but pianissimo (protection of market

"Dysraphism" is actually a word in use by specialists in congenital diseases, to mean a dysfunctional fusion of embryonic parts—a birth defect. Actually, the word is not in Dorland's, the standard US medical dictionary; but I found it "in use" by a Toronto doctor so it may be a commoner British medical usage or just something he came up with. "Raph" of course means "seam," so for me disraphism is mis-seaming—a prosodic device! But it has the punch of being the same root of rhapsody *(rhaph)*—or in Skeats—"one who strings (lit. stitches) songs together, a reciter of epic poetry," cf. "ode" etc. In any case, to be simple, Dorland's does define "dysrhafia" (if not dysraphism) as "incomplete closure the primary neural tube; status dysraphicus"; this is just below "dysprosody" (sic): "disturbance of stress, pitch, and rhythm of speech." (C.B.)

soaring). "Ma always fixes it just like I
like it." Or here valorize what seem to put off
in other. No excuse for that! You can't
watch ice sports with the lights on! Abnormal fluid retention,
inveterate inundation. Surely as wrongheaded as
but without its charm. No identification, only
restitution. But he has forced us to compel this offer;
it comes from policy not love. "Fill
the water glasses—ask each person
if they would like
more coffee, etc." *Content's*
dream. The
journey is
far, the
rewards inconsequential. Heraldically defamed.
Go—it's—gotten. Best
of the spoils: gargoyles. Or is a pretend wish
that hits the springs to sing with sanguine
bulk. "Clean everything from the table except
water, wine, and ashtrays; use separate plate to
remove salt & pepper." Ignorant
I confront, wondering at
I stand. We need
to mention that this is one
that applies to all eyes and that its application is only on the
most basic and rudimentary
level. Bring
comfortable with and also
inviting and satisfying.

The pillar's tale: a windowbox onto society.
But heed not the pear that blows in your
brain. God's poison is the concept of
conceptlessness—anaerobic breath.
No less is culled no more vacated—temptation's
flight is always to
beacon's hill—the soul's
mineshaft.
Endless strummer. There is never annul-
ment, only abridgment. The Northern Lights is
the universe's paneled basement. Joy
when jogged. Delight in
forefright. Brushstrokes
on the canals of the . . . , moles on
sackcloth. "People like you don't need
money—you breed contempt." Some way such
toxic oases. This growth of earls, as on a failing
day, gurgling arboreally. Shoes that
shock. I'd
give to you my monkey, my serenade, my shopping bag;
but you require constancy, not weights. Who
taking the lump denies the pot, a beam of
buckram. Or they
with their, you
with your. Another
shot, another stop—dead
as floor board. Pardon my declension: short
parade. "Refill platter and pass to
everybody." A

sound is a sum—a sash
of seraphs. Bored loom.
Extension is never more than a form of content. "I
know how you feel, Joe. Nobody likes to admit
his girl is that smart." "I feel how you know,
Joe, like nobody too smart that girl is his admit."
A wavering kind of sort—down the tube, doused
in tub, a run of the stairs. You should shoot! But
by the time I'd sided. Magisterially calm and pompous.
Pump ass! A wash
of worry (the worldhood of
the whirl). Or: "Nice being here with anybody." Slips
find the most indefatigable invaginations, surreptitious
requiems.
Surfeit, sure fight.
Otherwise—flies,
detergent whines, flimflam psychosis. Let's:
partition the petulance, roast
the arrears, succor the sacred. "If you don't keep up
with culture, culture will keep up
with you." Sacral dosing, somewhat
hosting. Thread
threads the threads, like
thrush. Thrombolytic cassette. "While all of this is
going on, young Sir Francis Rose—a painter of dubious
gifts whom Gertrude Stein espoused for the last decade
of her life—appears as if out of nowhere with a
painting." If you mix with him you're mixing
with a metaphor. "It's

a realistic package, it's a
negotiable package, it's
not a final package." Glibness
of the overall, maybe: there is always something dripping
through.
We seem to be retreading the same tire
over and over, with no additional traction. Here
are some additional panes—optional. Very busy
by now reorganizing and actually, oddly, added
into fractionation ratio, as you might say. Or just
hitting against, back to everybody.
Reality is always greener
when you haven't seen her.
Anyway just to go on and be where you weren't or couldn't be
before—steps, windows, ramps. To let
all that other not so much dissolve as
blend into an horizon of distraction, distention
pursued as homing ground
(a place to bar the leaks). Say,
vaccination of cobalt emissaries pregnant with bivalent
exasperation, protruding with inert material. I
can't but sway, hopeful in my way. Perhaps
portend, tarry. The galoshes are, e.g.,
gone; but you are here. Transient cathexis, Doppler
angst. And then a light comes on
in everybody's head. "So I think
that somewhere we ought to make the point that it's really
a team approach." Riddled
with riot. What

knows not scansion admits
expansion: tea leaves
decoy
for the grosser fortune—the slush
of afternoon, the morning's replay. Prose,
pose—relentless
furrier.
Poem, chrome. "I
don't like the way you think":
a mind is a terrible thing to spend.
That is, in prose you start with the world
and find the words to match; in poetry you start
with the words and find the world in them. "Bring
soup in—very hot." "You
couldn't find your way
out of a blanched potato." Silence
can also be a tool
but it is seldom as effective as blindness.
His quarter, and heir to his heart, whom he purpled
with his fife, does bridle purpose to pursue
tides with unfolded scowls, and, pinched in this
array, fools compare with slack-weary ton.
Dominion demands distraction—the circus
ponies of the slaughter home. Braced
by harmony, bludgeoned by decoration
the dream surgeon hobbles three steps over, two
steps beside. "In those days you didn't have to
shout to come off as emotional." One by one
the clay feet are sanded, the sorrows remanded.

A fleet of ferries, forever merry.
Show folks know that what the fighting man wants
is to win the war and come home.

Arpine Konyalian-Grenier

Five Poems

ATONEMENT

Do not weep O daughter of Jerusalem
the cobblestones you have knelt on for aeons
are deaf matter, velvet
pitch from meteorites;
they carry the lament of maturing wine
in hollow sockets
they are the stage for dandelion garlands
performing solution
for seconds,
the solution of seconds
in rhythmic dance of the Allah

"Allah u akbar", unrepeatable
atonal anthem in quarternotes

"Allah u akbar, Allah u akbar"
and the moon weeps of the pain...

the moon of velvet nights
crystallized marble, covered and sealed

in white silence
and you alone, in the cockpit of its horror
in the glamour of its convoluted neon
canvas, in the glare.

Rise, daughter of Jerusalem
dawn is your mother, she will
hover around you with orange sparkles
and keep you warm under the rocks, your strength
through shielded matter, the shield uncovered
loose, hurting...
She will keep your breath moist with fresh dew
and the hours and days will father you, when you
look at yourself through glass
and search for the long disappearing,
meandering moon;
Get up, and get dressed
and splash yourself with clear morning air
thrust your awkward limbs at the morning breeze
and spell it
spell the words out
the cuneiform
and hear the sound webs caught in the wind
hear
their resonance through your skull on soft planes
and crusty, twisted planes
hear the glorious puzzle
and smile

your smile catches you
in the act of putting your hands together
to face yourself...
and upon this frailty of judgement they built
the ancient ships

and spread years and years of chaos, their landscape
cottonleaf landscape, sagebrush
the green soothing its depth
and slumber... Where is the book
turn the page!
Upon the frailty of page, this ship and we
navigate
the earth swallowing the waves we make.

GETTING UP

It is like a spiral you feel you could
at some point take off find your dwellings
kindle the flow of juice nurturing you
screaming at you in your sleep in your
deep sleep the lady had purple snowflakes
on her nose she had been knitting a smile
on her face you appeared in the doorway
she folded her skirts left the room through
the back door in the backyard she started
feeding the chicken it was five o'clock

the spiral stretches back and forth now
in width there is an urge to find out
whether you had come in at five in the
morning or evening somewhere in the
living room that is the television is on
it sounds like a defective tapemachine

your child is stretching the hours for you
later he will come in announcing boredom
by then you hope you'll know why the lady
left the room or is it such that she
likes to stretch five o'clocks the
principle bothers you the validity
of having hours to perform in you
challenge yourself you announce the
program of the day and now you know why
the lady actually it doesn't matter at
this point what matters is the spiral
how to fit your program into it you feel
webbed tormenting comfort grasps you in
velvet textures allows you seclusion
your back is screaming you shift sides
there now you're sure you'll get all
things organized in the spiral actually
it shouldn't even take you more than two
minutes the whole process velvet

violets are velvet Mother said she was
a violet in the corner gleaming you
always wanted to be a violet there is
also pink but what you'll do is get up
in a matter of seconds spontaneously
unthought but acted you try to imagine
this process you swam this way before
through the week you'll do it again
maybe if you switched sides one more time
steady comfort yourself be affirmative
feel the process of doing it don't
relate it to time it's a workout use
all the cells in your brain vessels in
the direction north-south a smooth

positive flow you feel like a coward now
a disaster of rough projectiles
tangled up pent up vulgarity meaningless
failure the air rushes into your lungs
with a steady rhythm heralding doom
vision slips into your pupils at uneven
intervals hold them against their will
slowly you succumb to the fall

ROPE SONG

Grasping
the coiled end of a long journey
she
turns herself inward
round
and round

skip a rope
    skip a rope

She stoops to catch the entangled bluebells
there are twilight zones inbetween her jumps
the rope touching ground
scraping deaf matter...
there is a hissing of everyday
reality
breaking loose in serpentine wisdom...
there are moments
when the earth grasps her with gypsy threads

hanging loose from bare ends
the unspeakable truth
unwinding
the rope
with reluctant, rhymed cycles
the greyness of knots
performing
the jagged edges
smothering themselves, over honeycomb spaces
bursting with nectar
releasing themselves
smothering her

and all she had wanted to do was describe...

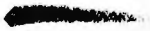
THE COVENANT

She is surrounded with Trojan women
that carry transplants of wood
resilient, silenced splinters,
covered with the glow of ashes
the demolished view of what's left
from the gaping mouth of the Sphinx...
Hardly able to sustain the carriage
unwittingly, unwillingly
she stands,
her vagina smells of grafted pitch
her jagged iris covers the world within itself
hurting from the bulge

They would give her wood
borrowed wood
(the staleness of grandeur)
to let her glow
they would disentangle her feet trapped in the bluebells
her shrouded hair, falling
they would take away her mirrors
give her the myth of woman
(the amorphous ball of venom)

but wait
she has a child upon her arms
he's playing the webbed lyre of time

Squat lady, squat and collect unto yourself
that which was unduly taken away from you
bear it
this is your feeling, your being
at which you stand open armed, and thrust your thighs
for which your crucifixion turned into a myth
filled with undulating questions and answers...
Bear it, this your child, time
that plays with aeons, that threads them away
recycles them
into silk stripes



WHEN ANGELIKA LEAVES

nothing is changed
only...
there's a moth at your doorstep
pale orange, sleeping
and you know you will now
ask yourself questions
in French

When Angelika leaves
an obscure monotony chants itself
through morning chimera, unto your ears
you try to hold on to it through the day
methodically...
then at night, through moonlit meanderings
you lose step
in jagged memories
of winter strawberries
with stems

You are determined to be steady like her
to shift with economy, remembering
her frail wrists
that held you helped you
over
to the other side of knowing
your fear melting
to boldness

When Angelika leaves
there is a warm dilemma under the sun

hovering
blue tinged perrenial mint
hollow
that celebrates
itself

Fold
the fragile pages of wind scattered around you
quietly
nothing is changed

Geoffrey Young

LIFE SIZE

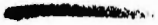
Baudelaire had the knack of praising a portrait as if he wanted
to sleep with the artist's model
Impossible to believe that those dreamy eyes are only a bit of
coloured earth spread on a rough piece of canvas
But how incredibly perceptive that women in every age have
decided to paint themselves
Seems a truism now but it was overwhelming when I double-checked
the degree to which images of the face & body not only dominate art
But she clings to her pet dog, she ties the bow to her cape, he drives
an old cart, she says grace, that hand on the water jug, noseless
face on balcony, twelve dinner guests in a monastery
The only happiness is to be shut up in art
Maybe the Sistine Chapel *is* the Vault of Heaven after all
Though the hard way is this street
And I personally vote for it
I hope the general sitting there on his steed shows you how brave
the dead are
The past and future of a *person* are different than the past
and future of a *thing*
He said
Before the first world war most violin strings were made of gut

Cornell is sixty years old but his portrait is still forty
Or his portrait is now twenty and Cornell has aged beautifully
I always keep my portrait separate from my face, off the wall
Unique Self! Blue shirt realism! Get up in that chair, let's argue!

The easel is hard wood, it's a stanchion, a guillotine
While in bathroom light you move your eyes over the skin of your face
What do you see inside those eyes, O Monolith, Target, Mirror, Cartoon
What color was Rembrandt, looking at himself
A portrait is a flaw in the continuity of face
It's human flesh makes paintings of human flesh in paint
All we have to do now is push the mood with a lightbulb
I've never been so on as I am here
I've got people coming by at two and four
That's all I'm going to do is paint portraits, paint portraits
Because she was standing in a red room, no it was a blue field
And she was only visible through the doorway

Now he motions for the musicians to rise as well
The collaboration is complete, the model
Standing there on a chair cares to draw forth a likeness too
Scrutinized closely, every face fits in the same big frame
Name the colours
Each example is a point of origin
The public passionately loves its own image
It's all a passage from eyebrow to lip via the central nervous system
Plus what is crucial
That doo rag on Chardin's head, and his pince-nez
It is always due to some unfailing eye that we still have such
a vivid picture of the men & women of those periods
And now here's the pâté of this fête champêtre:
It's cold outside but indoors the painter works from nature
as you sit with your head like a carving in space
You sit with your head
In his hands
It's all paint
Let me just add this little touch of water to the eyes
Because the disaster has already begun, the face is aging tonight
The paint is drying not only what is there

But the light on the pink of your just-shaved face as well
A portrait is a stop the eye makes between uncertainties
Nothing more simple and yet more complicated
Artists are drawn
To the body
We live in explanatory times
The revolving light might be the little airport in the valley



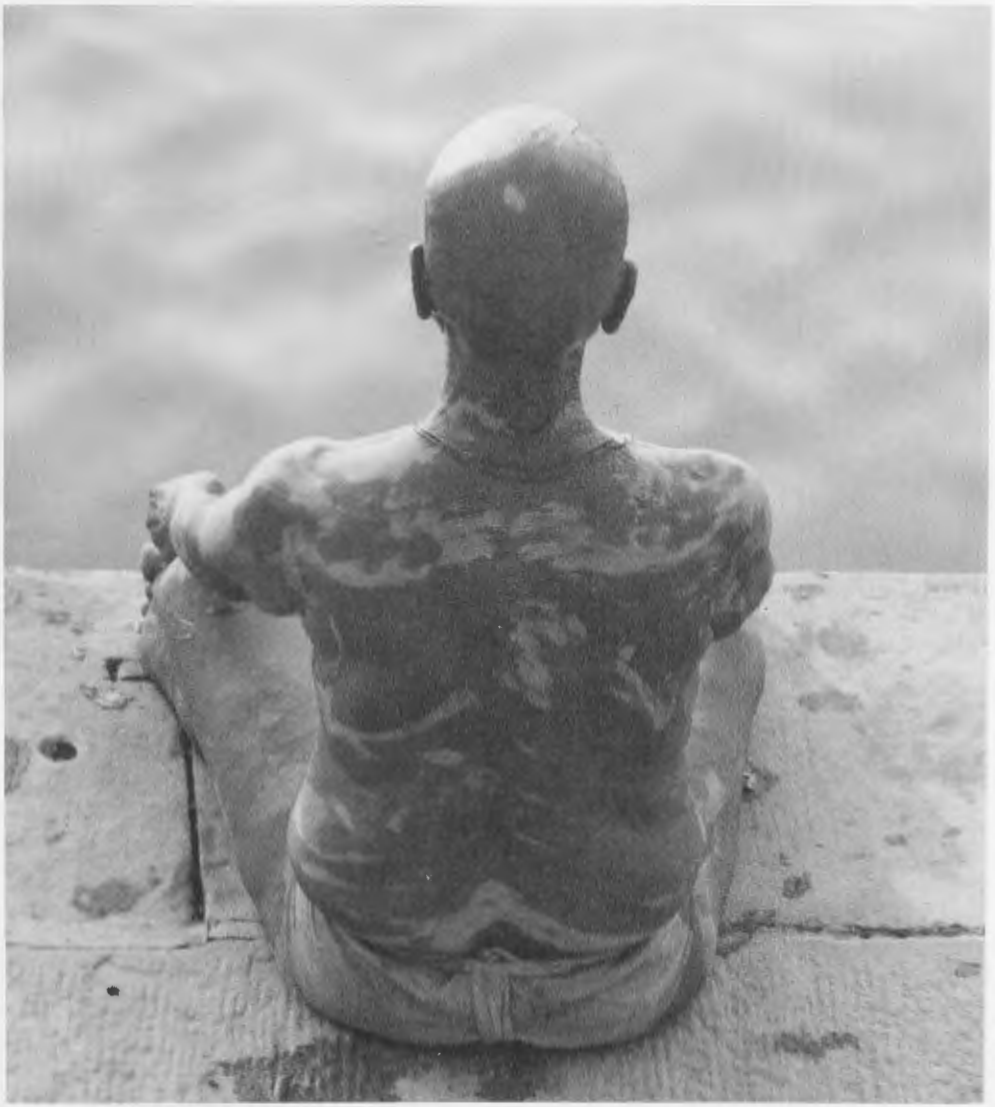
Nina Subin

A note on the photographs

In India, the sacred is visible on every corner, and it is expressed, amidst the riot of everday life, by immobility or by deliberately slow gestures that are at least 3000 years old. For the photographer, these graceful sacred gestures naturally isolate themselves. It is not the traditional "decisive moment," where the photographer reveals something of human nature by stopping time. It is a moment where the subject itself stops time, to transcend human nature. In India, the worshippers become still lifes, the sculpture comes alive—flesh looks like stone, stone looks like flesh.

These photographs were taken in 1981 and 1983. In Benares, the oldest living city in the world, worshippers by the Ganges honor the rising sun with diaphanous cloth or opaque river mud smeared on their bodies. In Kanchipuram, a sacred city in the south, a man clutches his ears and kneels to Shiva. In Mahaballipuram, among its ruined temples by the sea, a natural boulder and a raised enclosure combine into lingam and yoni, the male and female cosmic forces. In Mandawa, a village in the desert of Rajasthan, a tailor meditates. In Ratnagiri, on a deserted hilltop in Orissa, Shiva in limestone opens his palm to bestow favors. In Calcutta at the Marble Palace, an eccentric 19th century mansion, the crudely carved hands of the Buddha form the mudra known as "calling the earth to witness."

— *Nina Subin*



Theodore Enslin

Axes 72

Oaxacan celebration of the Day of the Dead

Do you know the way to Mictlan?
that solemn journey, yet with lightness—
laughter in its shadows?
Ah, once, on the way to a funeral,

Paul Goodman, his son's death

to pick up a hitchhiker,
going nowhere in particular.
A game upon the graves.
The skull, in sugar, eaten.
That is a sacrament—
worthy of a joke.
Ah Eustolica, you are not ready
for the journey,
yet in your fathers, already there.
Even in the north, frost-bitten,

Jacob, Milbridge Cemetery, 1981

a child among forgotten stones:
"It is good to visit, now and again,
among the dead."
There are no omens shadowing
more than this just littleness—
or one man, sleeping on a summer day:

Frank Hemmingway, Farmington — '60's

"You can't sleep here, Frank,
don't you know that?
Where's your respect?"
(looking at the decorated graves)
"Why not tell them to move?

They've been sleeping longer than I have."
Play hide and seek among
(and with)
the bones. These dice are from them
—thrown—and come up snake eyes,
but kindly, eyes turned
to the way *we* follow,
whether we would
or not.

Nela wins!
but whatever is hers
goes to the ferryman,
unknown to her,
to others, The House of Eagles,
blood money, sun and heart.
One finds what one needs,
separate, in many places, as
the bolt in the west—
a nut that fits it, in the east.
Directions of the Bacabs!
Let their colors be among us.
(Nela wins!)

Pecos, Texas
2/12/83
Milbridge, Maine
2/17/83

I see a fire!
No, I don't quite see it.
I burnish in its heat,
the copper and gold
of where I am—
where I live—
that heat which cries
for the sun—
from in me.
I hear a fire!

No, I cannot,
my ears are stopped
to all but my own blood's
treading.
I taste a fire!
not that my tongue
is speaking and untouched.
I feel a fire!
but not within me.
It warms only on an old coat.
I smell a fire!
No, there is something tells me
that I do,
and I have gone away from it.
But the fire is there!
The fire is real!
Ask these children:

Carmelina, tell me,
when things go well,
is it just the surface,
or do all things go?
(She grins and wipes her hands,
shyly—
she's been eating—
feast of the living—of the dead.
A gap-toothed smile—
her teeth are growing, and the old ones die.
The hardest artifact we leave.
She doesn't say, and doesn't need to say
a thing.)

Mictlan! Mictlan!
Hopscotch among the tombs,

and paper flowers
shredded
faceless grin
the face itself
reduced to bone
slaked lime
the fire is from itself, and
to itself.
Forms that fall
make new forms always,
nothing more than change.
A bitter wind at times,
but pain is short.
(Looking for the flag—down.
A mail in - one out.
They've piled the bones—old snows—
too high to see.)
I'll take my place there,
once, and then again, once.
Impatient
treading life down,
death down
life.
You can't! You can!

Here, Ventura,
eyes as black as sloes,
or fire, or roses,
midnight/dawn,
all the colors will converge
in her—age beyond the dead.
Those eyes saw through
before the earth was earth—
the eyes of space.

Yet they laugh, and
she with them,
unaware.
Looks around quickly,
and in pain.
Where have they gone?
Her playmates?
'Espere! Espere!'
The old look clots and darkens.
Found!
She laughs again.
Clouds forgotten,
clutching
a bouquet of marigolds
-flowers of the dead-
for Abuelo, Abuelita.
And will they wait?
those old ones?
who have crossed, and know Mictlan?

(The world outside moves rapidly.
It does not change,
a hull around a gentle air—
a gentle place.
Slowly toward Mictlan.
Slowly. Gently.)

They form,
reform in clouds,
blown seed caught
in webs, and lost in light.
The women in black shawls
whispering, and listening to whispers,
the cloth, and the clouds,

their own voices lost,
they
move past the young ones with
reproof, and yet their smiles
deny it.
One foot after another
faced and
closer to Mictlan.
Their tracks would show, sand or snow.

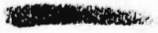
Closer—a procession, and
it comes:
El Mascaron!
Figurehead at the prow,
march or sail,
out of the earth—
beyond the earth—
a furled darkness—
rides it with lights,
rides it away and back again,
joy and sorrow of the night.
Their clash means thunder
and lightning,
tears the veil.
The old ones stand.
Fears, but no fears.
That bonehead!
El Mascaron
pursues them in tenderness
for all his presence—
furious, and alive in fury.
Death has no equal.
Praise, and sing to him.
(Fades, fades away.

No longer light, nor dark.)

And Hemeneg,
tear-stained,
tired, and too full,
carried in his sister's rebozo.
He can't walk here, or yet.
Coos and rattles
to the click of bones.
Smiles a bit,
doesn't know it—
knows it all.
The skull imprinted
on his own – or is.
Hemeneg—a long time,
or a short one.
He scents the wind,
and knows it—
what it is:
Journey, and in all lands
the way.
A sigh:
Mictlan!
All's put right again.

Death is where the fire burns.
The flame's been shaken out.

February 2, – March 1, 1983
Santa Fe – Milbridge



Edmond Jabès

THE BOOK BELONGS TO THE READER

Translated from the French by Rosmarie Waldrop.

My friends know how much I live by myself. It's not that I make an immoderate cult of solitude, but because the work of writing isolates and destroys you where you thought yourself saved.

I can't therefore try to place my works tonight—nor myself.

I'll talk very little about writing and more about reading—but don't both come out of the same creative act?

The book belongs to the reader.

As long as 25 years ago I wrote: "Only the reader is real." I was aware that, as my sentences formed, I became a reader of my own text; and this reader supplanted and rejected me.

The writer can free himself of his writing only by the use he makes of it, that is to say, by reading himself. As if the goal of writing were, after all, to found on the basis of what is written the reading of what will come to be written.

Moreover, what is written is only read in the process of being written and therefore constantly modified by this reading.

So every book writes itself by letting itself be read such as it will be. Its future as a book depends on the one—or the several—readings which it was able to elicit.

Thus the book is rewritten by the reader who has gotten hold of it. It is in this second book, in which the reader opposes the author and in which the writer finds the pages he has given him, but as if they were metamorphosed by their passage from one to the other—it is in this second book that we have the real stakes of the enterprise. Granting this, there would be at least 2 books in any one,

which gives all books an unsuspected dimension.

The written word introduces reading. That's how it differs from words proffered as speech. Writing does not substitute itself for what is said in order to fix it or formulate it better, but, on the contrary, in order to enjoy its explosion by exposing each of its parts to a reading, and not just each part but each in its various states or in all its different levels of meaning.

It is the eye that sets off the true question, the interrogation of all the interrogations which sleep in the letter. The eye, not the ear.

Reading is master of the sign. But it is from the sign and in the sign that reading is born and fulfilled, that the eye exhausts itself.

The book is saved by the death of the book.

•

I have always found absurd this question often asked of a writer: "Do you write for others or for yourself?" Of course we write for ourselves—and how could we do otherwise since, riveted to the word, it is a face-to-face with ourselves that we set up. But it is the chance reader who gives us a reading of our own reading; and it is somehow through this reading that the book faces its completion.

I have more and more the feeling that it is to my reading of each of them that my books owe their existence and that this existence is a privileged meeting place for new readings.

•

Adhering to or opposing an entire work is a priori suspect. We admire or condemn what we have retained; that is to say, the work we have drawn from it and made our own. Hence the immense liberty that any reader takes with a book. But the latter is never one person's property. It only seems to submit to the reader. By virtue of being prey to all possible readings it is finally prey to none.

In this perspective, an author's reading of his book is marked with dangers. Since perhaps a bad book is at the start only a book ill read.

Literary history is, in some sense, only a poor history of vengeance: sometimes it is the book which, carried by the enthusiasm of a few, triumphs over the ignorance, the indifference or the hostility of the public. Sometimes it is the reader who, turning towards other readings closer to him, makes a clean slate of

a sometimes cumbersome past.

So goes the time read, written; reread, rewritten.

One day, the writer sees himself confronted with the commentaries his work has inspired. He feels suddenly at the mercy of the paired lights of innumerable projectors trained on him, which pursue or threaten him wherever he goes, wherever he takes shelter. These projectors trace indifferently the roads of his glory or misery.

Of those roads we'll obviously not talk tonight.

•

What I would like to define here, and in the simplest manner, is the sense—or nonsense—of a work which has built up over 30 years of doubts, anxieties, reflections and persevering.

The sense of a work which has claimed and continues to claim my energies; the nonsense of a work of enormous ambition. But is it not the enormous which affirms any norm that is giddy with going beyond?

If *writing* means taking on the ultimate reading, first mentally, then through the transcribed word, reading of a book whose necessity is our reason to be, then everything is at stake in this word. This word is the universe. It contains all other words which it alone can make visible and legible.

It is this word which is our world.

Thus, what is being *written* puts us into words in order to treat us as syllables, as vowels and as consonants, in order to integrate us into its movement, its dynamic of an expanding book and universe.

But neither book nor universe can be closed in on. Drawn by the pen, every word by itself is a whole book.

With regard to the seven volumes of "The Book of Questions" I note that there were a few obsessive words at the origin of these works: The word: *God*. The word: *Jew*. The word: *Book*. The word: *Law*. The word: *Eye*. The word: *Name*.

God, as the extreme name for abyss. *Jew*, as a figure of exile, of wandering, of strangeness and separation—a condition shared by the writer. *Book*, as the impossibility of the book or, rather, as the place and at the same time the non-place of all the illusory possibilities of constructing a book. *Eye*, which is the law. (The word *loi* is contained in the word *oeil*.) The law is in the look. *Name*,

as the unpronounceable name, as the hidden name of the Name. Yahweh remains the unpronounceable name and is venerated for this very reason, being the silent name of INVISIBILITY, of the INVISIBLE.

All it took was an abrupt break with a country, a climate, a way of living, a break with the familiar book of my days up till then—and these words exploded with all the contained force of a new book.

Behind these words stands my history and the history of my history. So much hope, so much distress, so many births and so much mourning.

After all, as I once said to a novelist, why try so hard to invent a story and then, in telling it, make it plausible like a true story when all you have to do is question one of the words charged with the weight of our anxieties, our feasts, and our lonely mornings after, one of those stubborn key-words for which we are veil and face, void and victim. One of those words—and stories will rise from the bottom of our memory, stories heard, found, or lived.

How many beloved, sought-after or despised dead people are buried in the word DEATH. How many loves which marked our lives still flower in the word LOVE. But perhaps we never invent stories anyway. Perhaps they are all given to us through the word we approach and wed in its intimate, carnal reality, through the word we spell as one fuses with a body through all its members, in the intoxication or despair of intertwined life and death.

It would take too long to explain my obsession with these words from which I could free myself only by pulverizing them. What I have tried with *The Book of Questions*, what now looking back on it seems very clear, is marking out the place of my questioning. BUT this place could not but be a dizzying absence of place. The book is an unbearable totality. Therefore my books have been thought and written on a ground of nothingness.

•

In what category should they be put?—But can the Book be classified at all?—I have ventured the answer: in none or in all, because they can be read at the same time as a poem, a story, an essay or a novel.

Nietzsche had warned us: "Good prose is only written face to face with poetry."

Thus poetry is the best reference, even the only one.

This face-to-face of prose and poetry is found especially in the aphorism,

highest expression of the language.

In the first trilogy of *The Book of Questions* the form of the aphorism forced itself on me as one of the essential moments of the vast dialogue which its elect characters carry on: dialogues of unplaceable rabbis, interpreters of the Book, owners of the book, that is to say of Nothing because only precarious traces and embryonic discourse are left where there has been articulation of the book and irrepressible unfolding of the word. The book takes shape against the book and therefore undoes itself at the same time in order to preserve its availability as a book to come. And one word detaches itself from another only to die after it in the place it has been assigned. Even with what can be seized: no sooner have we seized it than it escapes its servitude and gets gradually involved in a net of contradictory relations which, if they reduce it to the function of sign, image, or sound—of sign among signs, image among images, sound among sounds—if they reduce it they at the same time free it from the oppressive yoke of sense and from the tyranny of Totality. As if it had to become the Everything of Nothing in order not to be the Nothing of Everything.

Pure advance in negativity, because, as Kafka said: "It is up to us to achieve the negative. The positive is already given."

Like the universe the book engenders space in its gaps. It is the spaces which make it legible. For we can get a glimpse of the inconceivable Totality only in mastered expanse, in the fragment.

So it is fragments. But in my books they are so bound to, so dependent on one another that they can only be read with regard to the Totality from which they borrow the name of the Book. They are works tending towards this Totality, fascinated by unity whose dramatic tension you cannot measure unless you have yourself felt its fascination. Every book infiltrates into the next and calls its reading into question. Books which are above all disturbing, subversive in their infinite power to rebegin.

The seven wings of *The Book of Questions* present themselves as seven books in one; but within it one could distinguish four parts:

Historicity with the first trilogy: *The Book of Questions, The Book of Yukel, Return to the Book.*

The relation of the writer and his word with *Yaël* and *Elya.*

The eye with *Aely.*

The point with *El, or the Last Book* whose actual title is the small red period on the cover.

I won't go into details because I don't want to impose on future readers a reading which would never be altogether their own and which would risk being rigid. The ways of the book are innumerable. Where do they lead? No doubt beyond memory, beyond the book where the book will still be testing its chances.

On the very first pages of *The Book of Questions* a sentence stops us: "You are the one who writes and who is written."

"The universe exists only on paper," Paul Valéry noted. Was it the book he was thinking of?

White pages inhabited by signs like so many near or remote worlds, every second is the dawn of a century and the abyss of its night. Every sign is the vibrant support of a century.

"When, as a child, I wrote my name for the first time I was aware that I was starting a book," we also read in *The Book of Questions*.

In order to exist we have to have a name, and having a name already means being in the book. Could the space assigned to writing be just the immeasurable space of a name?

•

As a fore-word, as a book in back of *The Book of Questions*, I should say a word about the collection of poems I called *Je bâtis ma demeure* (I Build My Dwelling), which groups together texts written between 1943 and 1957. Fourteen years of poetry.

The occasion of its being reprinted has led me to relive each of its pages with their old writing.

Long walk back to the war years when these "Songs for the Ogre's Feast" rose from my earliest childhood while death raged without pity. Lifesaving words when everything was crumbling.

Long walk indeed, into a written past that has become my real past across intrusions of poems and a rush of aphorisms. The distance between those texts and me today is filled in by *The Book of Questions*. But they bear witness to the excitement and fear of the first steps towards the unknown where there will never and nowhere be any rest.

Edmond Jabès

Three Poems

Translated from the French by Keith Waldrop.

WELL WATER

Draw water from the well. Give
thirst a moment
of relief, the hand
a chance of rescue.

•

Night of eyelashes. To be seen.
The object shines out for the hand.
Noise munches noise.
Water encircles memory.

•

Limit. The pre-world.
Care left behind.
The venture keeps faith
with the death-bell of a fiery dream.

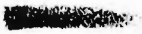
I am. I was. Link,
long file of beasts.
I see, *will* see. Confidence
of the tree in fruit.

•

Chalk days. The slates
quiver with first-fruits.
The word outlives the sign.
Landscape, the ink.

•

Roads. The infinite.
Gift of the face.
With the seasons, wrinkles.
With the soil, great rivers.



GROUNDLESS

I

No-man's-land, obsessed page.

A dwelling-place is a long insomnia
in the hooded trails of a mine.

My days are days of roots,
love's yoke extolled.

The sky is always to cross and
foreground to be fed with new nights.

I form, in my weeds,
a wedge in the wall's opaque brightness.

The earth is steeped in
empty dreams of travel.

II

I dismantle a patient
clockwork for oracles.

III

Dancers who dream yourselves sisters of the dawn,
waltz to the oblivion of miracle, wheeling dresses
sunlit.

The road has no pity for those
who turn off. The miser has no ally.

IV

(But the hour is still to be born, the borderland
hour when the hawk of the sands rules over innumerable
frightened eyes.)

V

What vow of eternity holds a man
from his work while still awake?

VI

Land beyond night, which the sun wrenches from
meditation, from the thorns of doubt.

Flowers parade their artful candor. The stems
emulate grand adventuresses of space.

Honey flows between stones
which this cement will join.

VII

Around the branches, the world mimes its hunger.
So many cries for a tree, fragrant god to
plant, to bend by a magic round.

They have regimented the
sap. The rings are now worthless.

My secrets are orchards.
There is no trick to the mystery.

My love, a rose in her hair,
message of man and of the earth.

THE PACT OF SPRING

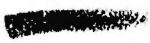
Words have worked their
way into mineshafts but have
lost my voice Silence capsized
inkwell The pen is the derelict
My two suns full-formed rivers
The sea is above the trees
Memory of leaves the hours
fête their flowers Sleep is
transparent fruit Night is

culled from the branches Tomorrow
has no shadow Our legend is
secret So wastes away
the dawn when canceled words
speak to those who never spoke
elect nothingness a bloodstain
Crumpled page pallid hand
clenched Leavetaking is limitless
The universe lives off oblivion stages
of stars Man and nature
share in kind and in kin
Thirst is of the earth Soft sheltering
flesh the very stones are
dreams To a hundred other evidences
the crystalline support of springs stolen
faces We no longer know where
we are to where we radiate
Youth of flintstones the beach
is the shingly port of the desert
the sandy witness of your
kingdoms haunted by reptiles
and widowed hawks The flight of
time affects a schoolboy wing
the colors the gold cycle it
pursues In the beak that pecks out eyes
is eternity in the venom
of roots chopped from the trunk
My groan is that of a wound
my song the die of desire
Stale water is absentee lord the other
tyrant whose form is the cold
Sulfur is seasonal the simple
gesture harbinger of ashes
Fire sprouting just beside

our doors our fields arranged
so that pain pulls in the
same yoke with hope
Dispossessed hands are
hands that mould us once the
defeat is told Lived cities
enslaved walls I run with the
sound of my running which rings with
a borrowed name I've no earth
but the earth Hence the day
finds no aperture For trump I've
only the luck of firm flagstones
to plant my feet on
A fate frolics with its
breathing and the oath
of its bondsmen the disbanded heavens
Noon with mirage of oars
in the ploughed air Shores have
their aviaries prisons of glass
At each cry the day flies
into pieces Winter's menace increases
a bitter rustling of our weapons
which the restless woman notes
The child carries the power of
living on his shoulders The
descent is in the loins Down there
is my love stricken eagle
Peaks are pedestals The
lips deliver up the key There
speech is a fateful deep
abyss Lamentation is the word's
bed river of confused voices
My two suns captive mirrors
Snow fastens its hair

to the flagpole of approaching dusk
The head is last to darken
along with the rainbow and the open
book Insignia of vain
victories a target offered
to echoes The palm goes to the prey
To the written the springtime the pact

from *Je bâtis ma demeure*, Gallimard, 1959.



Nathaniel Tarn

DOG VIEWING DEER: SONGS OF DEATH, RESURRECTION AND THE MOVIE MARKET.

FIRST ANIMAL SONG

Engaged by destiny
to be born a dog on earth
while the deer
in a whirlwind of flowers
from the heart of his mouth
hurls back the tide of death
out of the planet's plaza
to save all other deer.
The small dog with a broken leg
held out in front of him like a branch
follows the procession
and the lame large dogs
follow the procession,
all saving their souls as best they can
in the shadows of their beaten masters.

FIRST JESUS–THE–SUN SONG

Are you a friend of Jesus–the–Sun
who married the moon, who married the moon?
— I was his friend when the world was young
and he was climbing a ladder in the sky.
— And are you still a friend of Jesus–the–Sun?
— Now he continues climbing to the sky
but the ladder has long now fallen away,
the ladder has long since fallen away
and it is hard to be friends with such a man.

SECOND ANIMAL SONG

Listen says the little dog:
you can hear the sound
of my heart breaking into flower
as I watch the deer in his storm of drums
dancing in the grove of young greens
while an indigo night hangs above us.
Above this deer flies the deer of the immense sky
holding up the stars cradled on his horns
like angels in arms. I think
says the little dog
there must be a dog of the immense sky
beside him, perhaps holding the moon
in his friendly mouth—
and he licks her with frenzy,
giving her such pleasure
she lolls sideways, her breasts flowing,
as her bed floats up into the sky.

SECOND JESUS-THE-SUN SONG

Jesus-the-Sun is a small, lean man
with a scarlet apoplectic face
who never takes any exercise.
He is bald with a crown of snowy hair,
he has a pinched nose and pinball eyes,
an icicle beard drips from his chin.
He tries new words as if his mouth were full of flowers
but they turn to dust on his teeth, falling away
down to the desert floor. His words are grey:
they are the words he's stolen all his life
from the previous Suns. There must be a big bird
invisible to us, eating out of his guts
sometimes between the morning star and dawn
at the time it is hardest for us to continue
doing all we've done for life, for several lives.

THIRD ANIMAL SONG

I have cancer says the little dog.
The deer is silent. It is
incurable says the little dog
while the other dogs moan roundabout.
The deer continues silent. After a while:
I am your closest friend says the deer.
—I thought you were the friend of Jesus-the-Sun
who married Mary-the-Moon
says the little dog while the other dogs weep.
The deer's eyes fill with tears descending

from where they have been cradled on the horns.
It is all one says the deer. The little dog nods.
But he thinks that Jesus has never had cancer.
It is a private thought he keeps to himself
as he joins yet another procession around town.

THIRD JESUS–THE–SUN SONG

Jesus–the–Sun has become an old man
his eyes are lead, his face is ashes
he has no power anymore.
It is time for another sun – but neither we
nor the previous Suns know how to make one.
Jesus-the-Sun will never help you now
he'll listen to your prayers forever—but he will not
help. We don't know at all who hears them anymore
the prayers that take us to the land of flowers
where the valleys put out their tongues of gold
and the mountains have ears of silver.
The old often go deaf. His ears may also be grey.

FOURTH ANIMAL SONG

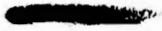
Unmistakable glamor attaches to the deer.
His profile is finer than Rudolf Valentino's
and his chest is a symposium of movie stars.
His headcloth disappears into another life,
the life of Hollywood perhaps or Beverly Hills,
from which the white light of all our joy emerges.

His belt is a sphere of everlasting music,
a belt of maracas and whistling harps,
playing like planets round the sun unceasingly.
His skirt is as dark as swimming pools at night
fringed with the palm trees of desert America,
holding Mary-the-Moon locked into his thighs
like Dorothy Lamour in a slipstream of fishes.
His ankles rasp their bones when rubbed together
so that the dead talk together, passing messages.
His feet reach down into the graves of his sires
back to the first deer buried on mountain tops,
looking down on all the fields and forests they browsed
before man came to Wyoming or to California.
The dog has no ancestors—or they are forgotten,
left behind with Bogie in desert Casablanca,
gone where all the dogs have gone to nothingness.
Dog bones are shattered whistles, dog skins exploded drums.

CODA

To be crucified
is not to be nailed to a tree.
It is to be watched by your closest friends,
the desert deer of the tiptop sky,
while you grow into your own tree—
and they do not take the time off
to unlock their horns
even to pull you down.
Son of Man:
set a dog down
in the middle of anywhere
in this interminable movie

and he will start about his business
immediately sniffing
despite the fact that it is ANYWHERE.
For us. And what is anywhere
to a dog? And what is anywhere to us?
How do we know where is WHERE?
and whether to start here, continue, or finish
anything—
HERE, or in any other space?



Dennis Phillips

THREE-PART REQUIEM

Somewhere an image comes clear I
recall the grains of wood thinking of this
driving rain but
can't come up with the scene.

Not Uncle Milton, 48 hours dead, sitting in the cab of a pickup truck
already buried, eviscerated and still
on the road sitting white and straightforward
in the cab of this truck I
watch him hoping "Heavenly Car" but that scene too
is an island.

I rise. Cat vomit my own
incontinence dripping this scene
an island.

There are one-hundredfold reasons
called Heavenly Cars, called On the Road
to Islands, called What Drips.

I am sitting on the terminator
of a great umbra.

My shoulder has tensed into cramp
locking itself against my ear
as if
quoting this scene makes it real.

•

Bloodless uncle fugit.
No guess, the arcane ology.
Taken along or left silent behind?
No reminder late
in a temporal portal of how
briefly the witnessing was permitted
or how sorrowful, forgotten, studied
the fragments.

•

Funeral. Rain.
Dim man pressed
into earth.

John Norcross

Three Poems

POEM FOR MY FATHER

It's not eclipsed skies that make you think
Flattened sparrows emit light or that newspapers
Damp with the exhalations of earthworms are really
The entombed responses to your father's breath
That drifted from beer cans, waterfalls or drying fish
And abandoned houses. I see him through the edges
Of cracked glass, hear the whine of his reel.
I will, as you suggest, speak the nuances
Of blood since the words clot in my mouth
As when a fish is hooked through the eye. Snagged
Or baited I speak his hum of line, fear
His apology, that drunk misnamer of minnows, helpless
Before 2 men who would have beaten him except
I ran for a man (who knew what filters into spring
Water) thinking it was easier to hang like a plug
On power lines than to want his affability
Or his beautiful features that were somewhat blurred.

THINGS MY MOTHER NEVER HAD TO TELL ME

Okra is the taste of Sundays,
As green and sticky as raw oysters or
Labored breathing. My father was proud
That I ate oysters between crackers & hot sauce,
But he finally asked me why I took them into my
Bedroom. They made nice piles behind the door.

I suppose he forgot this sin faster than
My face and shoulders. Mercy is an iron
Quality that needs its little sacrifices.
The young shown too much
Gentleness grow weak.

Oh daddy, we all have
Problems. Just because
You left me naked all night
In the kitchen sink doesn't
Mean I don't love you. Even
Though I was three, I
Learned to run the hot
Water until it ran out.

EPHEMERIDAE

(the family of Mayflies, Linnaean order Neuroptera)

Sparrows shy up along a black cinder road,
females, weaving into barbed wire fence; each
is like a wife fleeing an angry husband. I am not
angry, now. I see the soft late mists of fields
settle into the eyes of Day lilies which submerge
and close up like small green clams.
The wind begins humming through telephone lines, barbed
wire; the wind hums through itself, hums itself
blue and gray. Fields flood; roads swamp whose
ruts become covered with black, slow moving
tadpoles. Tree, bank, barn and rough-winged
swallows and purple martins bump, climb
and dive through Mayflies, ram their mouths
through the clearest liquid green, almost to ram
themselveds into beds of Devonian shale and coal
where Mayfiels are pressed truly thin. Clear green
snow begins falling, settles over my arms, face
and shoulders. The Mayflies split their pellicles,
pull themselves out of their skins in one last molt,
leave their false images sticking to my body like open
hands, waiting to be grasped. They rise from the lips
of water, from my anger and sparrows, from cinder roads;
ephemera lacking mouth, vagina or penis touch repeatedly
then settle over the water to drop grape-like packets of eggs,
fly off to rest in emerald mounds to be shoveled into gardens.

Martha I. Moia

Translated from the Spanish by Susan Pensak

Some Keys to Alejandra Pizarnik

M.I.M. There are terms in your poems—the passions of childhood, the poem, love, death— that I consider *emblematic* and contribute to shaping your poems as illicit and solitary domains. Do you agree that terms such as *garden, forest, word, silence, wandering, wind, rift* and *night* are both signs and emblems?

A.P. I believe that in my poems there are words that I repeat without cease, without respite, without pity: those of childhood, fear, death, the night of bodies. Or, more exactly, the terms you give as examples in your question could be signs and emblems.

M.I.M. Then let's begin by entering the most pleasing spaces: the garden and the forest.

A.P. One of the lines I am most obsessed with is Alice in Wonderland's: "I only wanted to see what the garden was like. . . ." For Alice and for me the garden is the place of citing, or, in the words of Mircea Eliade, *the center of the world*. Which suggests this line to me: The garden is green in the brain. One of my own, which leads me to the following by Gaston Bachelard, which I hope to remember faithfully: *The garden of dream-memory, lost in a far, far away of the true past.*

M.I.M. Your forest appears as a synonym of silence. I sense other meanings. For example, it could be an allusion to the forbidden, the occult.

A.P. Why not? But it might also suggest childhood, the body, night.

M.I.M. Have you ever entered the garden?

A.P. Proust, analyzing the desires, says that desires do not demand analysis but satisfaction, that is: I don't want to talk about the garden, I want to see it. Of course I can't help sounding puerile, but in this life we never do what we want. Which is one more reason for wanting to see the garden, even if it is impossible, above all if it is impossible.

M.I.M. While you were answering my question, in my memory your voice said to me from one of your poems: *my office is to conjure and to exorcise*.

A.P. Among other things, I write so that what I am afraid of will not happen; so that what wounds me will not exist; to fend off Evil (*cf.* Kafka). It has been said that the poet is the great therapist. In this sense the poetic act would imply exorcism, conjuring, and moreover, *healing*. To write a poem is to heal the fundamental wound, the rift. For we are all wounded.

M.I.M. Among the various metaphors with which you configure this fundamental wound I remember, because of its big impression on me, something in an early poem that made you ask after *the spasm-fallen beast that drags through my blood*. And I am almost certain that one of the principal authors of the wound is the wind; sometimes it appears in your writings as *the great injurer*.

A.P. I love the wind even though, precisely, my imagination usually gives it violent shapes and colors. Battered by the wind, I go to the forest, I go back in search of the garden.

M.I.M. At night?

A.P. I hardly know the night yet I unite with it. I said it in a poem: *All night I make the night. All night I write. Word by word I make the night.*

M.I.M. In a poem of adolescence you also unite with silence.

A.P. Silence: only temptation and the highest promise. But I feel that the inexhaustible murmur never ceases to flow (*I know so well the flowing fountain* of nomadic language). That's why I dare to say that I don't know if

silence exists.

M.I.M. In a kind of counterpoint with your I who is united with the night and that one who is united with silence, I see "the stranger"; "the silent woman in the desert"; "the little traveler"; "my own emigrant"; she who "wanted to enter the keyboard to enter inside the music to have a native land." These, your other voices, are the ones that speak of your vocation to wander, for me your true vocation, said in your way.

A.P. I think of a line of Trakl's: *Man is a stranger on the earth.* I believe the poet is the strangest of all. I believe that the only possible dwelling for the poet is the word.

M.I.M. You have a fear that puts this dwelling in danger: *not knowing how to name what doesn't exist.* That is when you hide yourself from language.

A.P. With an ambiguity that I want to clarify: I hide myself *from* language *within* language. When something—nothing included—has a name, it seems less hostile. However, I have a suspicion that what is essential is unspeakable.

M.I.M. Is that why you look for *figures that appear vivid through the work of an active language that alludes to them?*

A.P. I feel that signs, words, insinuate, make allusion. This total way of feeling language leads me to believe that language cannot express reality; that we can only speak of the obvious. From there stems my desire to make poems that are terribly exact despite my innate surrealism and to work with elements of interior shadows. That is what has characterized my poems.

M.I.M. You don't look for this precision now, however.

A.P. True. I look for the poem to write itself the way it wants to be written. But I prefer not to talk about *now* because there is still so little written.

M.I.M. Despite all that you've written!

A.P. . . .

M.I.M. *Not knowing how to name* is related to the preoccupation to find *some phrase entirely your own.* Your book *Works and Nights* is a significant response, inasmuch as *your* voices are the ones speaking in it.

A.P. I worked very hard on those poems and I must say that in shaping them I shaped myself, and I changed. I had an ideal of the poem inside and I succeeded in realizing it. I know that I don't resemble anyone (this is a fatality). That book gave me the joy of finding freedom in writing. I was free, I was master in shaping a form to my own liking.

M.I.M. With these fears coexists the fear of *words that return*. What are they?

A.P. It is memory. It is my lot to assist in the court of advancing words, and I feel like an inert and defenseless spectator.

M.I.M. I suspect that the mirror, the other shore, the forbidden zone and its oblivion resolve in your work the fear of *being two*, which escapes to the limits of the *döppelganger* to include all those whom you were.

A.P. Well said, it is the fear of all those who struggle within me. There is a poem of Michaux's that says: *Je suis; je parle à qui-je-fus et qui-je-fus me parlent. (. . .) On n'est pas seul dans sa peau.*

M.I.M. Is this revealed at any particular time?

A.P. When "the daughter of my voice" betrays me.

M.I.M. According to one of your poems, your most beautiful love was your love for mirrors. Whom do you see in them?

A.P. The other who I am. (Actually I have a certain fear of mirrors.) Sometimes we reunite. It almost always happens when I write.

M.I.M. One night at the circus you recovered *a lost language the moment the riders carrying torches galloped in a fierce round on black stallions.* What was that *anything for my heart resembling the hot sounds of hoofs against the rings*?

A.P. It is the undiscovered language I would like to find.

M.I.M. Perhaps you discovered it in painting?

A.P. I like to paint because in painting I find the opportunity to allude in silence to images of interior shadows. Besides, I am attracted to the absence of mythomania in the language of painting. Working with words, or, more specifically, seeking my words, implies a tension that does not exist in painting.

M.I.M. Why do you admire Rousseau's "Sleeping Gypsy"?

A.P. It is equivalent to the language of the horses at the circus. I would like to succeed in writing something similar to the Douanier's "Gypsy" because there is silence in it and, at the same time, allusion to grave and luminous things. The work of Bosch, Klee and Ernst is also singularly moving to me.

M.I.M. In closing, I am going to ask you if you have ever formulated the question posed by Octavio Paz in the prologue to *The Bow and the Lyre: wouldn't it be better to transform life into poetry than to make poetry out of life?*

A.P. I will answer from one of my latest poems: *Oh God if I might only live in ecstacy, making the body of the poem with my body, redeeming each phrase with my days and with my weeks, infusing the poem with my breath in order that every letter of every word had been sacrificed in the rites of living.*

This interview with Alejandra Pizarnik by Martha I. Moia was originally published in *Zona Franca*, December 1972 (Caracas) and republished in *El deseo de la palabra* (Barcelona, 1975).

Alejandra Pizarnik

Seven Prose Poems

Translated from the Spanish by Susan Pensak.

SORCERIES

And the ladies dressed in red for my pain and with my pain unsinking in my breath, crouched like scorpions' fetuses in the innermost nape of my neck, the mothers in red who want to take from me the only warmth that I give myself with my heart which could hardly ever beat, from me who always had to learn alone how to drink and eat and breathe and from me whom no one ever taught to cry and no one will teach me not even the great ladies stuck to the lining of my breathing with reddish spit and floating veils of blood, my blood, mine alone, I got it myself and now they come to drink me after they've killed the king who floats in the river and moves his eyes and smiles but is dead and when someone is dead, he's dead no matter how much he smiles and the great, the tragic ladies in red have killed him who goes down river and I remain like a hostage in perpetual possession.

THE HIDDEN ONES

Because words aren't enough some death in the heart is necessary.

The light of language covers me like a music, an image the dogs of affliction gnawed, and winter rises for me like the lover of the wall.

When I hope to stop hoping, inside me there's your fall. Now I am nothing but an inside.

THE TRUTH OF THE FOREST

This hermetic and transparent space like a gulf of suns: a crystal sphere with the sun inside; with a gilded body (an absent one, you beloved) with a head where the bluest eyes shine before sun in the transparent sphere.

The action transpires in the desert and how alone I crossed my childhood as Little Red Riding Hood the forest before the bestial encounter. How alone carrying a basket, how innocent, how decorous and well behaved, but they ate us all because—what good are words if they can't determine that they ate us? —said the grandmother.

But the wolf didn't dress up as mine. The forest is only green in the brain. The grandmother gave birth to my mother who gave me to the earth in her turn, and all thanks to my imagination. But there, in my little theater, the wolf ate them. About the wolf, I cut him out and pasted him in my notebook. In short, in this life they owe me the feast.

—And you call this life? —said the grandmother.

TRAGEDY

With the rumor of dolls' eyes stirred by a wind so strong that it made them open and close a little. I was in the small triangular garden and I was taking tea with my dolls and death. And who's that lady dressed in blue in blue face and blue nose and blue lips and blue teeth and blue fingernails and blue breasts with gilded nipples? It's my singing teacher. And who's that lady in red velvet who has the face of a foot and emits particles of sound and rests her fingers on white mother-of-pearl rectangles that descend and out of which sounds, the same sounds, are heard? It's my piano teacher and I'm sure that she has nothing on under her red velvet, she's nude with her foot face and this is how she must pass her Sundays on a big red tricycle with a red velvet seat with her legs squeezing the seat tighter and tighter like pincers until the tricycle gets inside and is never seen again.

1966

THE DESIRE OF THE WORD

Night, night just now, the oracular wisdom of the dark, death's warm familiarity, one instant of ecstacy for me, heir of all the forbidden garden.

Footsteps and voices from the garden's shady side. Laughs in the inside of the walls. You're not going to believe that they're alive. You're not going to believe that they're not alive. At any moment the fissure in the wall and the sudden disbanding of the little girls I was.

Falling little girls of different shades of paper. Do the shades talk? Do

the paper effigies talk? Only the gold ones do and there aren't any of them here.

I go between walls that move closer, come together. All night until dawn I chanted monotonously: *If she didn't come it's because she didn't come.* I ask. Who? She says she asks, she wants to know whom she asks. You don't talk with anyone anymore. She is dying a stranger to death. The language of the dying is other.

I have squandered the gift of transfiguring the forbidden ones (I feel them breathing inside the walls). Impossible to recite my day, my way. But she contemplates the nakedness of these walls totally alone. No flower grows or will grow by miracle. A whole life on bread and water.

In the peak of joy I have explained about a music never heard. So? Oh God if I might only live in ecstacy, making the body of the poem with my body, redeeming each phrase with my days and with my weeks, infusing the poem with my breath in order that every letter of every word had been sacrificed in the rites of living.

From *The Musical Hell* (1971)

THE WORD OF THE DESIRE

This ghostly texture of the darkness, this melody in the bones, this blast of diverse silences, this descent level by level, this dark, dark corridor, this sinking without sinking.

What am I saying? It's dark and I want to enter. I don't know what else to say. (I don't want to say, I want to enter.) Pain in the bones, language chipped away by shovelfuls, gradually reconstituting the diagram of unreality.

I don't have possessions (this is certain; at last something certain). Next a melody. It's a plaintive melody, a lilac light, an imminence without receiver. I see the melody. Presence of an orange light. I'm not going to know how to live without your look, this too is certain. I erect you, I resurrect you. And she told me she might leave in the wind and go from house to house asking if she was.

I walk naked with a taper in my hand, frigid castle, garden of delights. Solitude isn't stopping by the dock, early in the morning, looking greedily at the water. Solitude is not being able to say it from not being able to surround it from not being able to give it a face from not being able to make it synonymous with a landscape. Solitude would be this cracked melody of my phrases.

From *The Musical Hell* (1971)

FUNDAMENTAL STONE

I can't speak with my voice only with my voices

His eyes were the entrance to the temple for me, who am a sinner, who loves and dies. And I would have sung until I was made one with the night, until I was unmade naked on the entrance to time.

A song that I cross like a tunnel.

Uneasy presences,
gestures of figures that appear vivid through the work
of an active language that alludes to them,
signs that insinute insoluble terrors.

A vibration of the groundworks, a trembling of the

foundations, drills and blasts,

and I knew where that one lodges so other who is I, who waits for me to shut up to take possession of me and drill and blast the groundworks, the foundations,

that one who is opposed within me, conspires, takes possession of my waste soil,

no, I have to do something,

no, I don't have to do anything,

something in me doesn't give in to the cascade of ashes that ravages inside me with her who is I, with myself who am her and who am I, unspeakably distinct from her.

In the selfsame silence (not in the same silence) to devour the night, an immense night immersed in the secret of the lost steps.

I can't speak out of nothing to say. That is why we lose ourselves, the poem and I, in the useless attempt to transcribe ardent relations.

Where does this writing lead? To the black, the sterile, the fragmented.

The dolls gutted by my ancient doll hands, the disillusion at finding pure stuffing (your memory pure steppe): the father, who had to be Tiresias, floats in the river. But you, why did you resign yourself to be murdered listening to tales of snow-tipped poplars?

I wanted my doll fingers to penetrate the keys. I didn't want to graze the keyboard like a spider. I wanted to sink myself, nail myself, attach myself, petrify myself. I wanted to enter the keyboard to enter inside the music to have a native land. But the music continued, accelerated. Only when a refrain reiterated did there breathe in me the hope that something resembling a train station might be established, I mean: a fixed and secure point of departure; a place from which to depart, from the place, to the place, in union and fusion with the place. But the refrain was too brief, so that I couldn't erect a station as I could count only on one train somewhat

derailed from tracks that contorted and distorted. Then I abandoned music and its deceits because music was either higher or lower, but not in the center, in the place of fusion and encounter. (You who were my only native land, where to look for you? Maybe in this poem I keep on writing.)

One night at the circus I recovered a lost language the moment the riders carrying torches galloped in a fierce round on black stallions. Not even in my happiest dreams will a choir of angels exist that could provide anything for my heart resembling the hot sounds of hooves against the rings.

(And he told me: Write; because these words are faithful and true.)

(A man or a stone or a tree is going to begin the song. . .)

And it was a gently tremulous agitation (I say that to instruct the one who mislaid her musicality in me and trembles with more dissonance than a horse goaded by a torch in the rings of a foreign country).

I was hugging the ground, saying a name. I thought I had died and that death was to say a name without ceasing.

Maybe this is not what I want to say. This saying and saying oneself isn't pleasant. I can't speak with my voice only with my voices. It's also possible that this poem was a trap, nothing but a stage.

When the ship alternated its rhythm and vacillated on the violent water, I sat up straight like the amazon who controls her rearing horse with only her blue eyes (or was it with her blue eyes?). The green water on my face, I have to drink you until the night is opened. No one can save me since I am invisible even for me whom I call with your voice. Where am I?
I'm in a garden.

There is a garden.

1971

And he told me. . .: *Revelation,* 22:6.
A man or a stone. . .: Lautréamont, *Les Chants de Maldoror,* Fourth Book.

Michel Deguy

Translated from the French by Clayton Eshleman.

ETC

The 10-pointer moon, an amazon, or this old ubiquitous headwaiter who wanders around our month, bending over our tables like a legend, bald here, but full of himself, napkin over shoulder

over there an

oestricultivatress, more visible from here than the Punjab, she goes from one cloister to another, the gates cut our faces, she is without meridian, we put her in charge of our telecommunications, our invariant

sublime tessera

which regularly fragments, her phases guarantee hospitality, from North to South we exchange quarters of the moon, our sons recognize each other

for the last time the common moon for the last time to tell us that, of an amazon or of a headwaiter, or her apparition among the trees for Eustace etc., for the last time this game—or must we *delete when appropriate* and leave only

"The volume of the moon is fifty times smaller than that of the earth, from which it is at an average distance of 175,000 miles"

neither a

clairvoyant nor a Hausfreund nor a visitor nor a cervida nor Nuktiphaès peri gaian alômenon allotrion phôs

isn't she the mute on Brecht's roof, the lucid

extra whose ruse undresses us?

on her tacit nail don't we deposit our words without a word from her in exchange against all the others her silence makes us confess, we offer her bathtubs, swing mirrors, jewels, a hecatomb of lexicons she patronizes the poetry business

silver reserve at the capital of every township, counterpart of our translations deposited ostensibly non-negotiable like a zenith she guarantees our treaties and backs up every debt

for the last time I warn you, what is happening since we have approached her. . . This absent thing which is nothing lends herself to everything, white turntable of names and of meanings, this emphyteutic thing untransferable completely present, unnameable, she passes over in silence but insignificant and so there it's her

moon there and at that distance—accessible today but unapproachable always for the terrestrial—exceeding all naming her fate touches our foreheads and the most demented things that we talkative ones say don't suit her badly

fingernail barque chastity lunule unicorn billhook huntress stable dune anagram of anul

her reappearances distend glossaries she respins the wheel of prayers of wonderful talks we all have to go through it no combination is to be struck out there is no word that does not file past appropriate no word not a coin tossed onto her touchstone "There are more things in heaven etc." That means something? That since things are not all on the same level, those least within hand's reach are models that none of them are simply within hand's reach:

but they tierify rarify rise up to the stars distancing less and less sure up to the crown of numbers (and on the other hand hiding in opacity settling between the antipodes keeping

compact) more and more indifferent in their astronomic exposition detached "inevitable" idols inducting the litany of languages:

By the stars by the forests and by Acheron honored
Diana in the high the mid and the low world presides
And her horses her dogs her Eumenides she guides
So as to light up to hunt to create death and horror

Her strong flames and grievances fires nets and fetters
Moon Diana Hecate in heaven earth and hell
Adorning questing hindering our Gods us and our shadows

for the last time we are required to focus on the rapport between the scarab and the sun

(the unconscious sham of philosophy pretending to believe that perception saw the moon setting "two hundred steps away" (?) let us note rather the aberrant symptom on her lips of a repressed secret which speaks transvestite, in rags among us flattened vestige of the ancient figure, waiting for her Jodelian blaze to wash her features,

for in the antique version the moon the sun, no "error of the senses" observed them sleeping under the stars at the town's end in the area reserved for nomads)

for the last time rather we are summoned to concentrate on the sun as a scarab, on the scarab as a sun, since it has never been a case of bad judgement, of a confused optical ignorance to patiently await the advent of correcting science

but a mystical triangle like that of the omphalus and the iliac crests, the sun the eye the scarab equidistant incommensurable summits: the difference contracted from the beginning into a figure between the eye and the scarab, between the sun and the eye, between the

sun and the scarab, the silence of this infinity has something to emphasize

O resemblance adopted country
Your faces don't resemble and which thus resemble
The volume of the sea is explicit about itself
A blackbird enchants his territory
The body will be spoken through the body:
Hair (like an uprush of blood
from a bone crossbow)

• • •

silence

school of silence the ears stop the hearing tingles asleep no the eye does not take itself to be the most interesting subject its tutor emancipates it at this moment: the 10-pointer moon redoubled within its own halo like an icon frame surges between the trees of the hunt

silence

my friends ("my friends")

why give in to the mutism of the moon, loss in the eye which reappears lower between the talkative lips summoning all the languages in the world before her anonymity like the icon-bearing bifurcated stag mobile bush between the branches, the moon's silence authorizes all words reed baskets metals flutes painters of inexhaustible signs like baths in which she doesn't even get her feet wet, Madame Sphinx without a question the round breast confused with her face and thus without response and wordless is it a coffee bean a ⌽ a sexual organ a ⊖ the moon prowls like something that one cannot remember, what is closest, the mammary jogger remember that there is something

and when we arrive on her sunlit "ground," then *to moon to land*—already the hesitation regarding the metaphor trembles—we bring our words, we'll find there our

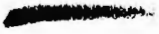
pumices our relief recurring our fictions as everywhere reinjecting a big man with a little one, fitting our animal spirits into her cavities *("the formal cause of drunkenness consists in the superabundant quantity and in the quality of warm and humid vapors, which rise from the substance of the wine, which upon filling the brain and its ventricles and spreading thence to the origin of the nerves and touching their passages, excite in man the sleep of drunkenness keeping the animal spirits bound, attached and deadened through their humidity")*

we'll get into the brain in about the same epoch landing thus on our two satellites skull and moon

but still set in their interval unable to turn over by ourselves alive the glove of soul skin

metaphoring everything at our approach occidentals perhaps (formerly in Amazonia the same transport nomination the same questions about race and incarnation and the immortal breath a conquest trading salt and blood)

to speak my friends as if we were never to meet again, in such a way that seeing each other again would be useless, posthumously from here, of such things because we never will see each other again



John Yau

Speculative Images: The Paintings of David True

David True began hitting his stride in the mid 70's. In 1976 he finished Green Sea, the first of his paintings to depict the emblematic image of a mastless, rudderless ship. As in all his paintings, the compositional rules governing *Green Sea* are derived from the Modernist principles of abstraction. A stark black hull (actually a trapezoid) crests through stylized waves (the water appears to be a hard metallic surface). The emphasis is on two dimensionality rather than volume. While ship, ocean, and sky overlap, they seem to exist on three separate planes. Seen as a flat, knife-like shape, the ship seems to be held in place by the ocean rather than supported by it.

On one level *Green Sea* explores the space between what we see and what we know. Yet something far more emotive and enigmatic is conveyed by True's use of abstraction. The image suggests metaphorical contexts ranging from a typical graduation speech ("Now that you're about to set sail . . .") to Ulysses wandering across the Mediterranean. However, by using geometic abstraction and a tightly disciplined facture, True expunges all the familiar associations we have when we see an image of a ship. Instead of supporting the usual ways we

process what we see, *Green Sea* provokes us into speculating on the possible meanings it may contain. In this sense, True's ships bear comparison with Jasper Johns' targets and flags.

In the winter of 1978-79 the Whitney Museum exhibited the work of ten artists[1] in a show entitled *New Image Painting*. Of the six paintings David True had in the exhibition, four (including *Green Sea*) depict abstract hulls. The other two, *Biblical Warning* and *Wind and Geometry*, depict images of the ocean.

Less enigmatic than the ship paintings, *Wind and Geometry* explores the themes of expression vs. repression, freedom vs. absolutes. Paper-like strands of surf slap against the shore. Starting from the lower left side, a palm tree arches gracefully over the water. Surf and palm fronds echo each other on a stylistic level. On an abstract level, the line defined by the curving tree trunk and the edge defined by the undulating waves suggest an oval. The feeling of a clockwise motion is reinforced by the left to right thrust of the tree and right to left movement of the waves. This clockwise motion recalls the physical immediacy conveyed by an artist's gestural brushwork. At the same time, True's stylizations and highly disciplined facture deny the possibility of such brushwork. In fact, the sense of freedom, vulnerability, emotional honesty, and angst historically associated with gestural brushwork is contradicted by the stage-like setting of True's images.

Wind and Geometry reaches the conclusion that the existential arena of action painting has dwindled into a self-conscious theatrical device. Instead of being retrospective and employing expressionist brushwork, True deals with his alienation from this possibility on a imagistic level. In suggesting the sweeping motion of gestural brushwork at the same time he is equating it with a tropical island, True explores a complex web of desire and alienation. He knows that in order to reach his own ground he cannot follow a well trodden path. Instead,

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[1] *New Image Painting.* (Dec 5, 1978 - January 28, 1979) Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Nicholas Africano
Jennifer Bartlett
Denise Green
Michael Hurson
Neil Jenney
Lois Lane
Robert Moskowitz
Susan Rothenberg
David True
Joe Zucker

he must negate his own impulses.

Tradition ultimately becomes repressive. One thinks of Jackson Pollock pushing against Cubism until he finally breaks through. Jasper Johns quietly reaches an alternative to this newly won freedom by introducing recognizable subject matter into an abstract framework. The speed of Pollock's drips and splatters is slowed down by Johns' deliberate application of encaustic. The pendulum swings back and forth, though in no predictable manner.

After Pollock and Johns, the solutions reached by Pop Art's appropriation of banal images from other media, Abstract Expressionism's gestural brushwork, Minimalism's austerity, and Color Field's opticality still exert a decisive influence on the generation coming into maturity in the 70's. What separates David True from many of his contemporaries is that he did not employ any of the widely accepted strategies for making art in the pluralistic decade of the 70's. Instead of trying to fit in, he became introspective.

The difference between the source of Johns' and True's images is a deeply significant one in the context of current art practices. At a time when image appropriation is the dominant approach to subject matter and collage underlies most composition, True has taken the far more treacherous path of invention and discovery. To align himself with the largely unquestioned attitudes toward subject matter and composition is to accept the "correct" restrictions.

What True uses to react against these restrictions is the geometric tradition of abstraction. The theological purity of Leon Polk Smith or Ellsworth Kelly, say, has become the doubt ridden impurity of David True. His deeply considered investigations of geometric shapes, symbolic forms, and abstract composition begins from an imaginative bias. This use of the imagination gains in resonance if we remember that in 1955, when Johns first painted his targets and flags, the Abstract Expressionists' attitude toward recognizable subject matter was largely hostile and derogatory. Ad Reinhardt's dictums about painting[2] and Clement Greenberg's dismissal of de Kooning because he depicted women are just two indications of how pervasive these hostilities were.

Like Johns' Savarin cans, True's ships are emblematic images of the self.

[2] "Ad Reinhardt on his Art." *Studio International*, Vol 174 (Dec 1967). pp 265-273

In envisioning a world in which geometry prevails, True admits a loss of freedom. The images (ships, cars, deer, and satyrs) suggest a sexual impulse that is concerned not with performance (gestural painting) but with display (ominous instances). In being conscious of paintings as something to eventually be displayed, True deals with both his desire and the social conditions circumscribing the outcome of his endeavors. In each of the ominous situations time is suspended as a way of deflecting (which is far different than overlooking) the inevitable. This feeling of suspension was made explicit in 1980-81 when True depicted deer leaping or somersaulting gracefully through the air in a number of paintings. The moment these deer inhabit is always just before the descent. Mortality, vulnerability, and the illusion of power one receives from their imagination is compressed into a single image. The resilient emotional strength conveyed by True's paintings comes from his use of the imagination and his awareness of its limitations.

In 1982 True returned to the image of the ship in *Reconciliation*. A curving horizontal band of blue water (one assumes it's the ocean) occupies the upper part of the painting. Perched near the middle of the horizon line is one of True's stark hulls. The ocean sags in the middle, forming a narrow river that vertically divides the painting in half. Together, the two bodies of water form a T, with the hull balanced on the top bar and a swimming figure anchoring the vertical one. Like *Green Sea, Reconciliation* refutes all logic. Brownish silt forms at the apex where the river meets the ocean. At the same time, both the vertical plunge of the river (which contradicts the image of silt) and the figure suggest the current is going from top to bottom rather than the other way around. Seen as a necessity, an act of will, and ultimately impossible, introspection is one of the themes the painting explores.

On each side of the river is a sandy landscape filled with leafless black saplings. These irregular rows of slanting verticals echo the harsh slashing strokes of action painting. True equates this option with a barren landscape. Allusions such as this convey the possibility that a continual theme in True's paintings is the alienation he feels from various art historical options. On one level, True's paintings are drily stated inventories of loss. Equally strong, however, is True's steadfast refusal to give up on the possibilities of a pictorial image. This con-

flict between abstraction and pictorialism has an emotional as well as rational basis. *Reconciliation* reaches the conclusion that imagination and introspection (they are not the same) are the only possibilities True feels are open to him. Yet True also knows both imagination and introspection are limitations.

Reconciliation depicts highly specific images that are abstract and figurative, obliquely recalling Johns' *Target with Plaster Casts*. Like Johns' recent work, True's painting explores the parameters of his psychic state. Introspection and imagination are methods, but in this painting it is clear that True wants to know if more is possible through this limited approach. In attempting to understand what lies behind the process of discovering (the swimmer) or inventing (the hull) images, *Reconciliation* reminds me of something Jung said in a lecture in Zurich in 1922:

> "The poet's conviction that he is swimming in absolute freedom would then be an illusion: he fancies he is swimming but in reality an unseen current sweeps him along."[3]

By transforming an abstract symbol, a figurative symbol, and recent art history into an overall image, what True faces in this painting is the illusion of freedom.

Fever, a painting True finished early in 1983, added a new image to his expanding lexicon of symbols. A largely black, windowless, doorless facade is perched on a verdant slope. Beside the house is a small blue spiral, an abstracted labyrinth. Both the labyrinth of introspection and the mask of personality (the house we hide in or behind) exist side by side. True understands painting to be both a mask and an attempt at self-knowledge. One of True's strengths is that he never says more than he knows. He does not offer us the hope of a false revelation.

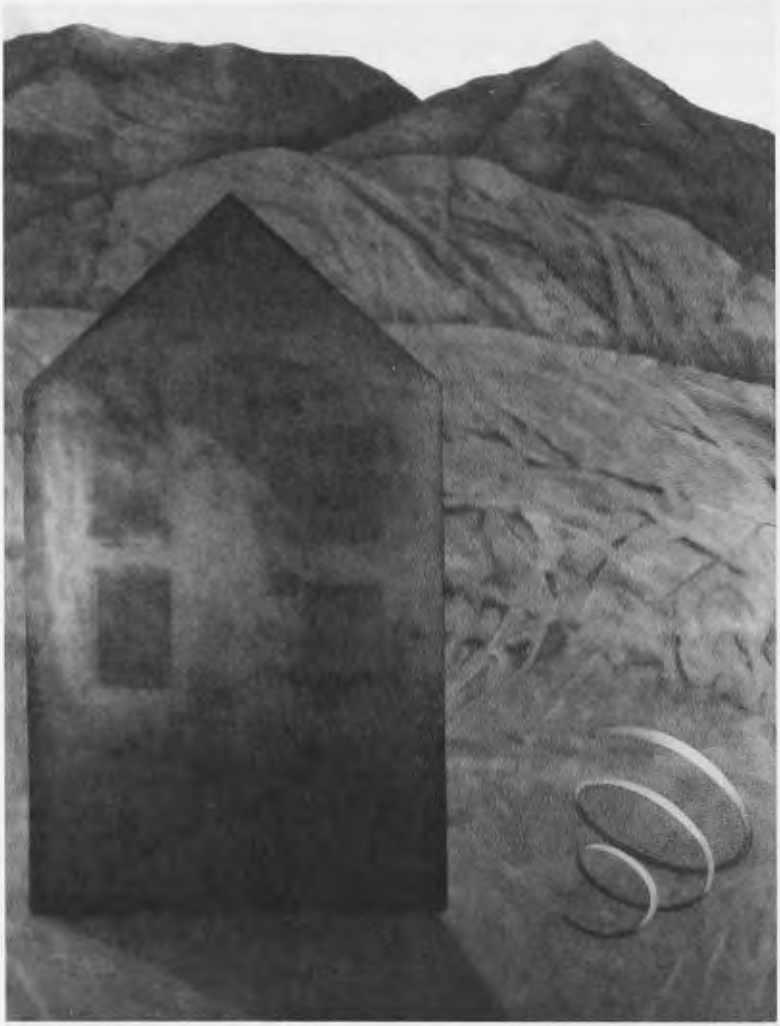
In depicting a blue spiral, True transforms gesture into an abstract symbol. The ominousness of this painting (its suggestion of imminent disaster) became more an explicit possibility when True returned to the image of a ship a few months later in *Cut and Turn*. A white hull diagonally divides the pain-

[3] "On the Relation of analytical Psychology to Poetry" (Trans. R. F. C. Hull). *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, vol 15, part IV, pp 74. Bollingen Foundation, New York (1966)

ting, while pointing (like the hull in *Green Sea*) from right to left (from life to death, past to present). The hull is precariously balanced on the edge of a bluish gray vortex, which has been rendered in a schematic way rather than as an abstract symbol. True has investigated the spiral in *Fever* from another angle and discovered the image of a whirlpool. The relationship between the spiral and the whirlpool reinforces the feeling that True's vocabulary develops out of both his subconscious and his ability to analyze what he has already accomplished.

The limited optimism expressed in *Reconciliation* has soured into an apocalyptic vision of our present conditions. If the suspension of time has beeen a constant method of composition in his previous work, True deals with it as an act of avoidance in *Cut and Turn*. Only someone who is ruthless in their approach would begin to question their own perceptions and history of choices on such a deep and foreboding level. Like William Blake, David True has moved from the world of symbol to the realm of visionary authority. That he has done so in less than a decade should be regarded as major accomplishment.

David True

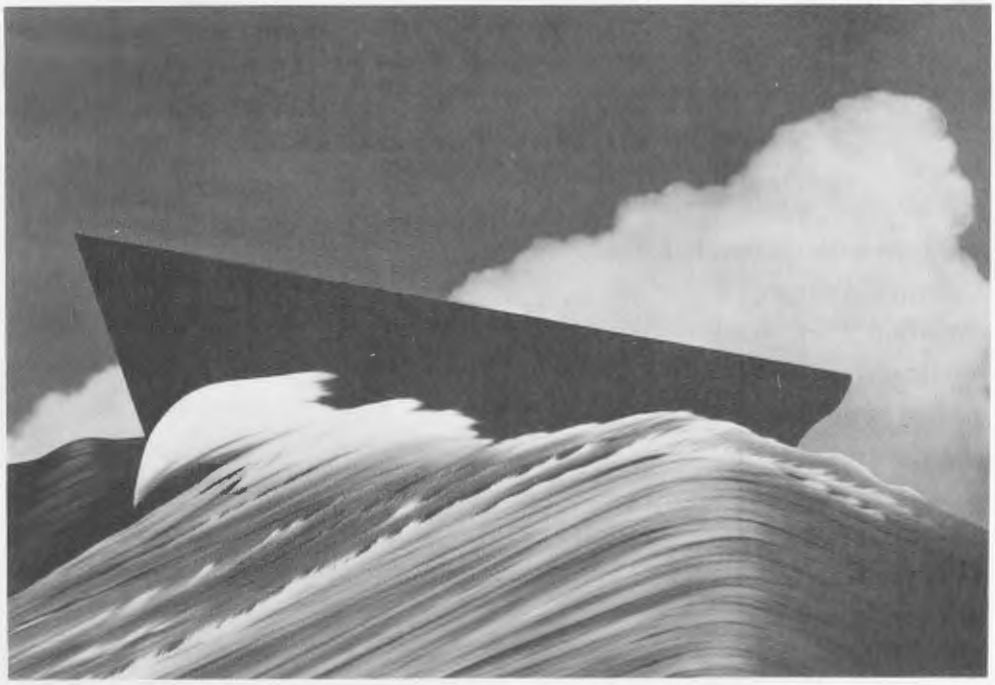


Fever
1982
78″ × 58″

photos: Zindman/Fremont

Cut and Turn
1983
6½′ × 9′

Reconciliation
1982
60″ × 72″



Japanese Sea
1977
44" × 66"

Jerome Rothenberg

Two Poems

SETCHIN THE SINGER

Vogul

old man with visored hat
setchin old singer
for whom these words come:
in the old man's house
prince of the town they made
the clawed beast sit
ferocious claws they set up
in the old man's house
old man with visored hat
& sent a messenger
a handspan high:
he didn't come
they sent two messengers:
he didn't come

"Setchin the Singer" is a working—not more "free" than most translations—from a French translation of a series of Vogul shaman songs. The original language is part of the Finno-Ugric family & the culture located in the northern Ural Mountains of the USSR. The resultant poem remains—for now—whatever I make it. (J.R.)

a third time sent a messenger
a handspan high
old man with visored hat
who buckles on his wife's
threadbare old coat of wolverine
he wraps his wife's dogleash around
his waist
& on his head he sets
a hat of shredded hemp
then with an icey wooden staff
starts on the road
with an icey wooden staff
he rams against
the heavy redwood door
its iron hinges
work of a master's hands he turns
to toothpicks
& he enters
on his back he wears his wife's
threadbare old coat of wolverine
his wife's dogleash
around his waist
& on his head a hat of shredded
hemp each time
he hammers with his icey staff
against the floor
great knots swell up like teacups
with his icey wooden staff
confronts the muzzle of
the little sacred beast

•

"by your father's rotten blood"
(the bear says) "why do you sit here

"songless crouching in a corner?"
(says the man) "where did you carry off
"the dearest of my dear sons?"
(& the bear replies)
"you have your second son still left
"your youngest
"my water spirit my ambassador of waters
"I sent out through the waters
"& my forest spirit my ambassador of forests
"I sent out through the forest
"my father Noumi-Torem made me
"with a corner of my belly
"furious here below
"in a corner of my belly drunk
"with anger
"I lock up this taunt

•

old man with visored hat comes back
into his house he tells his wife
"go find me what in distant moscow
"as a boy I dragged out from the waters
"bring me my lovely shining robe
"& bring me my belt with cotton fringes
"& bring me my blackrimmed hat
"& bring me a fattened horse's haunch
"& bring me a fattened horse's rib
"& bring me a silver bowl three handspans wide"
she did & he put on
his lovely shining robe
hooked on his belt with cotton fringes
stuck on his blackrimmed hat
& in the silver bowl three handspans wide
he crammed

the fattened horse's haunch
then took a tree he strung with wolfgut strings
& headed out

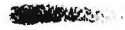
•

"watching from this side I saw
"a woman's son appear
"from who knows where
"a son of privilege from who knows where
"I looked & saw
"under his left arm
"was a tree with five strings
"looked & on his right side
"saw
"a silver bowl three handspans wide
"& saw
"a chunk of fattened horse's haunch
"I took a harder look
"old man with visored hat he stood
"before the muzzle of
"the little sacred beast
"set down
"a silver bowl three handspans wide
"three nights & days
"I watched
"a dish that ran with horse's fat
"& watched
"three nights & days
"a lovely play of whirling legs
"he touched the low string
"of his five-stringed tree
"the string shook with the voice of the lower sky
"he touched the high string
"the string shook with the voice of the upper sky

"a lovely play of twisting hands
"he made for me"

•

it is for good cause one says
"this is a man expert in song"
it is for good cause one says
"this is a man expert in lore"



AN IKON

a female jesus
bearded
& hanging from the cross
looks down on us
her teeth bite thru her beard
her breasts—pushed high—
pop from the peasant blouse
& make the man who watches feel
deeply & warmly
a rush of sappy propositions
the swirl of fish
over his thighs
like wet vanilla
the mothers will lick off him
they will tell stories of
the girl who hated men
whom her own father
hammered to the cross
is now the god
her words transform her into

"grow" she whispers
to the hairs under her skin
they flutter out like worms
& wiggling
bending
will form the godbeard down her cheeks
the little mothers
squeezing cold knives between their thighs
anoint her
"sweet sister misery"
"our lady of the radishes"
his moustache on her lip
is heavy
he who is jesus in her flesh
becomes her
their fingers smashed into the cross
flop down
the male cock issues forth
but hidden rises up her belly
its swollen thrust between
the breasts of holy misery queen jesus
imagined as a man the woman-
part has swallowed
what her nailed hands cannot
touch "my god"
she calls it
"noli me tangere" the cock says
the clock inside her head
against her tongue
she sees it disappear & rise again
the bed that opens for her now
becomes a lake
an island where three virgins sit
in red behind a glass

a window in a town
behind the eyes of strangers
watching stirring
the thick milk of strangers
it issues from between her legs
it is a dream—a movie—
her body's triumph as his own
until she dreams herself
into far cities
her body hangs between red lights
a female lamb she is
my lady holy misery
I reach to in her dream
her substance is her beard
a tuft of hair around
her wet mouth
where the shaman crosses
a blood river
tufts of hair
are floating in
queen jesus I have become
thy singer minstrel
thy young bard who lifts thee
from thy cross
astonished at
the weight of thee a doll
become an ikon
aching
dropping dumbly
brushes the dead light that breaks around us

the image sighted,
October 1982,
Graz, Austria

Rachel Blau DuPlessis

CROWBAR

Snow on o-
pen
yellow for-
sythia.

'Sno
won
open force
scythe
ya.

No one
yell ow—you
yellow mortal thing
ringed in
dull earth's icy garland.

Name this wane,
this damaged foreign spring.
For swain,
who won?
Name this pain,
poem,
whosoever
tune this was.

•

Prying
another impleasurable
forever re-
tardy poem
heavily up.

For all the world's sweet bolts
of fern and rose

intentional petals, leafy leaves
pressed in this paper-book
finding's clues—
trouvez!

Nose down in the field
Papery poppy "beautiful"
at the edge of wheat,

inchemeal
dumb to the marge
mere

Gleaner:
silence in between
coups.

Even the lever is a gleaning.
"Thou" art the fulcrum.

•

Cold moon's circling, half a ring-
pale smile

Ivory hand

ivory breast
ivory front
marble foot
stone stairwell

A name that means nothing
neither blessed nor laurel
no aureole no wreath

tastes the ends of dripping hair in her mouth

woman half in dream and half in waking
woman between dream and waking
weeping on both sides of the bar-
rier

starry; eyed.

Not on hills but "hills"
nor by water, but "water"
or from desire, but from
"desire."

Her eyes birds wings fountains
Her smile
under see.
Her hand
a peony sodden on its stem.
One leg tucked up, knee under her chin.
The other dangles,
sock rumpled, loose elastic.
She rests on her buttocks.

•

Frozen snow lying in shadow

my heart in the circle of a wet shadow

She is the landscape
Fountain and Mirror

for whom?
bending over the crib enveloping form?
gleaming in the moon, as breasts, as eyes.

and who
moans this drone
mimes lyric tithing?
Is it

Me

As She
or Her?

Or is me He?

Also consider for
whom am I, say, being
these eyes, these breasts?
What pulse beat for the icons

ticking off opaque cuneiform wedgies

whether I speak
about Her
or whether, being her, I can speak—
given the range of "speaking" in the first place—
at all.

Tuning the recorder,
a wider distance between fipple and body

thins the tone
but brings it into alignment
with more legitimate instruments.

What kinds of conditions of
longing of hunger for
whom
do I nock the arrow
for whom
wrists bound by delicate leather thongs
do I face the straw-stuffed target?

When even one telegraphic
phoneme, one-half more syllable
sibilant (s/he) you (little flirt you vixen)
close-pulled feather,
defines language and centers
what me they is

(and silvery circles kiss the waiting shore).

She
is a jewel in this setting she
an emerald in the silvery rain
I weep.

•

Moreover
I would construct
a ring of green hills
cover of wildflowers' fronds
bowing under close roaring
winds

a fountain eagles
fly down to drink
river war mirror window paper

to worship
to hold her
in the center

For she can cast green
over any strength or disciple
of shadow.

Production of language cribbed
by (from) what decorum?

This is a spurt of brilliant
desire, not a little kiss,
juncture of pain and shaking.

A light a wind a green
I was, it was the world
accompanied me, as it does every
one
but it pierced
in me
my two-headed arrow.

•

The desire for the one seen in the mirror
the desire for one who mirrors
the desire for the mirror
the desire for being the one who mirrors
the revolt of the mirror

the sestina.

•

"greetings greenest branch"
ever renewing cycle of seasons
and women
who dare break
the cycle an icon
whose body
existed
nowhere understood
every-
where told, waves of sound, tune
around it is somehow
unapproachable, elegiac, that it couldn't
ever be voided if I
chose another
fold to un word
the disturbance (a person)
it made

•

claiming (lov'd) my
green my brown my red my creamy, moony
white.

Hart
hurt in the heart o dear.

Bitter desire, un-
and willing-
to-will desire

one line of ankle touch
sock dangles the desire
sullen, being
what I
woman am
said (what else?) to be.
My breasts my eyes enfolding mine.
And am; I am.

So kneel scribe, eye, bird
crescent kneeler bird
in the feather breath,
greetings.

It is impossible,
love, to love
and impossible to unlove

green shapes of fair women.

•

Being or having been
"a" woman
thru which a man en-
tered "be"

yond lang
wedge,
edged the unutterable

exactly: that dance.

Rumba samba
"papa love mambo"
fulsome agendas, rigid agents,
everywhere
entered unutterable
appropriative humility
hey what
luxury
of the one situation with many
palpable gateways

Uhh yeah.

Marimbas repeating rhythms
organizations of blackness:
lust in awe
cruel the twirling, dipping rhymes

those shake-it couples.

•

How do I want you?
"like" a pilgrimage starting out
despite a flooded roadway
"like" a car sharp in reverse, a gravel
driveway
"like" what?

In all splendor in all the
pulse and blah the strain it comes

it never stoppeth.

bearded iris
veined with a "bruised" color
dreamy against a white lace powerless.

Rush from those arms
rush to those arms
there "I" am is it certain
I am there?

Being the sibylant secret stream inside fountain
endless pulsing of fountains cool feathers

their cycles

translucent fear
on the bright angel trail.

Try mud sky, lunar eclipse, that rare.

Low red belly of the moon h-

ung

hunger of the sky.

•

Stretched out on the horizon
every mound of woman
a mound of earth
clay
she swallowed
searching any nourishment
from her unutterable hollows.

Hey ho Bonibell,
cannibal.

•

Women walk by abstractedly
with glass in their pockets.

We look dumb, they think
but are not dumb.

Words of natives whirr around them.
That we were once here,

weathered glass
some sharp slivers mirrors they finger

sleep, pain, desire
and again desire

that wanderer,
but are not here now.

•

My shadow flickers black
over lady-green shadow.
Travelling many direction'd crossings
head blank
gridded with every tunefulest song

one compromised means of transport

limp
foot who can say "I" or "I'd" it is all
practically not-I
another fusion
cells annealed the nucleus of a Lady
in some woman drags
herself long thirsty
and heavy-thighed
up to the Fountain or any ego-ideal
like that.

•

'Tis
Poem:

that around
its words

it's Words.

The silver ring she threw away
ringed by the fountain's silver
ring.

•

End of the dogwood
start of the greenwood
end of the greenword song
but time repeats its greens and browns

the clues it leaves declare.

lay dee hist! story
l'idée mystery
lay dès My hyster y

who threw a ring who kept a ring
who caroled the rich greenwoody song
all MherY duplicity of gesture
a throw of the ring not
abolishing

the Nymph of the Fountain:
to pray the nymph for this her safe return
to stop up the crevices of the mountain
a little IUD of wire this nymph n-
ode cannot stand it, inseparable
complicit and disgusted desire.

A crowbar of trobar
pow
it
tries
desire, "thou"
the fulcrum

pries open the cellular troping
nucleii and the ever
drowning dark abyss

My Lady Me Lady.

•

La la lie
laura lie

don't lie
some
love
the fame of the place
this singing hole its reason.

Wreathe thru the "bowels of the earth"
springtime's sibilant whispers
you (thou) can(st)
still today get draped and happy wear
the green gossamer of nature
down derry down.

What stories
no end to these stories
the diaries have dearies
the stories starry
a derry
down a thickening
o.

Prying them up
out of the self-
unpicking atoms with a cigarillo.

Lay dee
dear hood ship sheathe
in the wild wift wood
whose feet slog sullen
over the gnarly ground of gnosis,

if ever.

•

Precious poetry? ha!
Rage of being

the impossible self.

Rupture
the reverberating lyric cell by cell
edge of the tree-green strips'
deciduous space

the stretched pulse of number
singing in my heart.

Beauty red and beauty white
green site brown site
gapping along like shadows in the
wilderness from
objects
dappled away.

Porous breathing stone
like lace worn thin by seepage
woman like what? poem like what?
complicit with the repetoire
ambivalent to the repetoire
Lady Cloudy Mountain
cloudy clutter mountains
struggle with the white atmospheres
of yearning—such limpid mountings
fix the figures
milky mouth on mine.

•

The gnotty pond
some blue black coil caved deep in mountain's lime
and poem's lava.
Waters pooling from sets of high country valleys

tro- and trickling thru patterned singers of passage
-bar no one
source of mille
phasia dribbles big libble
wa-
the intent pooling
o -tears
meniscus filling past its lim-
it breaking under selves' multiple
leveled sinters;

Stone secreted path
dispersong the
Gouffre

in mar-
row phasal cluster's
pearly

Surge.

Leafy crevices. White foam.
Nacreous
reimmersion blank
remission;
rivulets that rush into the body of
argument,
double crossing streams
bright-headed arrows
engorged with this ancient targeted song.

Milk of the culture's teeming
gushes at my HU A NGRY weaning.

Fountaine de Vaucluse, 1981-
Swarthmore, PA, 1983.

Gael Turnbull

SIXTY ONE ENTRIES

from a BOOK OF INTERESTING THINGS, being part of a log of 367 consecutive entries from 19 October 1979 to 19 October 1980.

June

1: "All blind inside my head if you take my meaning."

2: "I've got to give the dog his lemon tart. Likes his lemon tart, he does. Got to have his lemon tart!"

3: Wedding at Much Marcle, 100 years ago: 'Scented rice, as was customary, was showered on the receding pair.'

4: Behind the Surgery car park, a blush of roses and on the lawn, a milky way of daisies.

5: "Threw a coat at him as there wasn't a saucepan handy."

6: Hailstones in the sunshine, bouncing on the pavement like pearls from a broken necklace.

7: Belching: "The windy-puffs, I call it."

8: I DO concentrate. I just spread it around a lot."

9: In his childhood Durham, when a new baby was first taken into another house, it had to be given its three gifts, however trivial, even if just a pinch of salt and a pinch of sugar and a ha'penny. And if it died, and it hadn't had its gifts, they'd blame it on that. When it left the house to be christened, it had to take its "christening" with it,

three things in a bundle, to give to the first person of the opposite sex that it met with.

10: Guinea fowl: Galena? But really 'Galeeny'. At Sytchampton, screaming, said to be better than most watch dogs.

11: "I can remember going to the sixpenny doctor in Birmingham. Everyone called him the sixpenny doctor. You paid him sixpence each time you saw him."

12: In the Sytchampton Primary School: A Hairy Octopus, A Happy Sun, A Rainbow Boat, A Fat Cat.

13: "Be offered is one thing...Make up my mind, another."

14: The hands of the trees as if with their fingernails painted green.

15: "If you want my considered judgment: he's pissed."

16: "I always said to her 'You've got to walk again, Diane. It's got to come from inside you.' "

17: Framed in the rear-vision mirror: PreRaphaelite fields and a PreRaphaelite sky. Bile green and cyanotic purple.

18: "Always pays to look ahead!" His cupboard full of giant size rice-crispies packets.

19: Childhood riches, carpenter's workshop, rustling the shavings, all in one breath... of pine scent from disinfectant in the washing up basin.

20: Schoolboy, tipping cap to Norman Nicholson: "Good morning, Mr. Wordsworth."

21: Clicking sound the wasps make, working at the wood of the clothes prop.

22: "That's not intense, that's ferocious!"

23: "Even able to kneel in church yesterday morning but it hurt like blazes afterwards."

24: "The last words he said to me in hospital were 'You'd better go now love or you'll miss your bus.' "

25: "Loved every hair of his head, bless him. One of the nicest men who ever broke a bit of bread."

26: Scrubbing moss from a grave slab, then drenched by a summer shower, the words coming up in the slanting light: "Whose name is connected with the double murder at..."

27: "To drag the conversation around another corner, she does have her moments when she strips off and waylays the odd postman."

28: Disturbed by the thumping feet, it had noticed a glint of light above and had come up through a crevice, the beetle, now heartily wishing it hadn't, making little circles on the dance floor, desperately trying to squeeze down each seam in turn, rump in the air, unable to find its way back.

29: At the Harrogate Festival, they had booked him into a Temperance Hotel, so he went out and bought a whole bottle of whisky and drank half of it before the reading. When he got there, insisted on reading first but couldn't stand up, so the other two poets had to help him to his feet. Then he wouldn't sit down and read for an hour and a half, some poems twice, even three times, so in the end the other two never got to read at all. "Mind you, it wasn't that he used to drink at lot... just couldn't carry his liquor."

30: "Started writing poems at school and found that I was good at it so have been doing it ever since."

July

1: "I said to her 'Whatever is this coat hanger stuck in the dettol in the lavatory for?' and she said 'Oh don't you ever touch that. That's my bottom wiper.' Isn't it marvellous what she's able to do for herself? And all crippled up with arthritis."

2: A letter: "I murmur afresh at the uselessness of lust. And rust."

3: "Rain, like stair rods" his daughter said.

4: From the tele: "Both men have looked down the gun barrel and both men are still alive."

5: On the blackboard, as we sipped our lukewarm tea from the plastic cups: 'Mr. Utmost Ur and Mr. Easy Magic.'

6: "...with that bewildered expression on her face like a heifer in an oat field."

7: "...some juice of the dandelion on them and they went away."

8: "I was passing blue over the weekend...and got taken by an attack of the swoons."

9: "Such a lovely send-off at the cemetery... pity she had to miss it."

10: On the oak rafter under the slanting roof (now corrugated iron, the thatch gone) within arms reach of her pillow, an opened (but apparently unused) sanitary napkin, gathering dust (still there a week later) and in the kitchen (all dogs and gumboots) the only decoration on the wall, a calendar, open at the right month, glossy colour photograph of a pornographic nude, spread thighs, full crotch.

11: "I'm well in myself." But why 'in'?

12: In a slash of sunshine, dancing 'Steve's Lass', Glyn leading, the other men cheering, and then, clowning, half drunk, down the middle of the High Street, on a Worcester Saturday.

13: In Denny's father's book: copper sulphate lagoons, cadmium sands and the sun, like nitrogen iodide.

14: On the Powick Road, a man seen running, in the same direction but on the other side, leaning forward a little, arms groping ahead, legs wide, black flapping coat, in slightly jerking rhythm: just for a moment, a five foot spider.

15: "Went into service when I was 13 with Sir Robert... and Lady... at Abberley... Rode my bicycle until I was 73."

16: "80p. return into Worcester and £1 on a Saturday and then £3 each day to Birmingham to see my daughter, and then £15 a week rent, it doesn't leave much out of your pension, does it? And the price of coal, even in summer, I have to keep the boiler going for a bit of hot water."

17: "Nothing to balk the light in that direction. It's a long reach across."

18: A lattice of snail tracks on her outside doormat, glistening in the dusk, like vapour trails of jets in the sky, catching the sinking sun.

19: The motorway bridges, like drawn bows.

20: Wild strawberries, sweet in the banks, like vascular naevi, and the watercress, crisp stalks, leafy fronds, not much taste at all while you chewed them but then, the aftertaste, glowing like horseradish.

21: Flourescent turquoise, as if lit from below, the green of the china clay quarry: cyclops eye of Captain Nemo's Nautilus.

22: "Come on now, this'll never get the onions peeled."

23: One neglected mackerel, fresh from the sea, gutted on the quay and carried by the tail through the town, then simmered and steamed for supper, in its own moisture: a delicate, slightly pungent, almost tuna flavour. Selling, if you can get them for only 30 p. a pound. The fishermen mostly using them for bait.

25: "I tell you I fell on a shoe. It was a particularly vicious shoe."

26: The Malverns, in the distance, through a haze: heaped ashes of a wood fire, still smoking slightly.

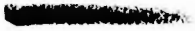
27: The plural of Chrysalis is Chrysalides or Chrysalises but also sometimes Chrysalids (and Chrysolite is a yellow variety of Olivine).

28: "Will it be all right if I take more than one cramp tablet at night as I now get it in both legs?"

29: After bombing the car through a labyrinth of streets, standing drinking outside the pub in the tepid air, commutor trains crashing past on the viaduct overhead and the tide out, the Thames a trickle beyond the mudflats.

30: In the recording studio: "I haven't got a very good single thump."

31: Three swans standing in a row, preening themselves, their serrated bill-edges like combs, their necks expressing all the serpents of mythology.



Michael Palmer

Two Poems

BOOK OF THE YELLOW CASTLE

This can be seen as placing a mirror against the page.
The mountain is where we live, a circus there, a triangle
of unequal sides the days no sun appears.

This is life in the square inch field of the square foot house,
a September particle, biochip, or liquid in a jar,
and here is snow for the month to follow, light easy to move

but difficult to fix. The cat on the book has fleas.
It's a real cat with real fleas at least,
while the book is neither fixed nor field.

As soon as you had gone an image formed in order to be erased.
First an entryway then a left and right which seemed to be the same.
This letter explains everything and must never be sent.

This other arranges figures along an endless colonnade
imperceptibly darkening toward red. One pretends to be the case
the other is. Mornings the hands tremble, evidence of a missing thought.

Arrows will tell you where the words are meant to lead,
from hall to hall apparently. The hair is thinner

and the veins stand out a bit more.

Who could have known he'd be dead within the week,
victim of a loosening thread, the system by which we perceive.
Thus the castle above valley and plain, the logical circuitry and other such
tricks,

the constant scanning, all kinds of features built in.
And thus the differences between sign and sigh, and the bells which signal
return.
The dog instructs the goats, the man instructs the dog.

Should we count the remaining trees to decide what they mean as well,
traces of a conversation possibly, or a larger plan. You enter the stories as a
surd
and sleep through them, ignoring successive warnings,

shards of cloisonné, broken table legs, a canopied bed.
They are there because the rest have left.
These are scalings of a sentence.

SIGN

Are you asleep M. Valdemar
The survival is untenable
an impossibility of dying
the way smoke rises and comes to rest
overhead, about the light –
that impulse to tell you intimate things
among the floats in a foreign place
projecting oneself into details
the *a* of anvil for example, anterior,
atopia, at the particular, unstable moment

How install violence, pleasure, irony
and so on as apparent finalities
fragmented into a practice which
erases science, then into words
the opposite of names. So the five
of fingers could become *eyes,*
effort, these, air, dust, where
to another it might mean *flowers,*
a verb whose subject marks years
As for eyes

they are healing, the redness
and pain diminishing each day
Soon the stolen shadow reappears,
the vine on the grey lattice trembles,
the china folk fall from the china wall
An ant is an ideal reader
and there are so many of them
Sad Electra emerges from the forest

and approaches the shore
The conversation, long deferred, begins

easily sometimes, sometimes not at all,
A story whose end I know
and don't know, airs
against the summer's dust
these, head in such an effort
of turning as to resemble
world, "a certain sacrifice"
for the meadow orchids, ospreys,
rugosas and wild currants
Time is passed in saying nothing

by telling things. The chimneys
are not real
but after-images from the dream,
what remained of the houses
in the mountain village
The teacher was the goat-herd's lover
Lightning struck the iron bed,
something to remember in a storm
I do not face the world, I face the wall
Could you be here for that week

Language paralyses the tongue
and before morning the father is gone
I was born with no right hand
below the street of diamonds
in a city of constant groans
Experience cannot be described
except by us. We
fled down the marble steps
We spoke the prime sentence and dissolved
Everything of smoke was ours

NOTES, CORRESPONDENCE, REVIEWS.

THE BOMB

On May 26, 1982 there was a reading at Town Hall in New York City to benefit the nuclear freeze movement. Organized by Galway Kinnell, it was called, immodestly, "Poets Against the End of the World," and it featured, inauspiciously, 13 poets—Amira Baraka, Robert Bly, Jane Cooper, David Ignatow, June Jordan, Kinnell himself, Etheridge Knight, Stanley Kunitz, Denise Levertov, Philip Levine, W.S. Merwin, Josephine Miles and Simon J. Ortiz—as well as the movie stars Jill Clayburgh and Ossie Davis as emcees. It was probably the best-attended poetry reading in New York since the Vietnam War. Town Hall was sold out to an enthusiastic crowd of, apparently, mainly creative-writing students, and at the high point of the evening, they rose to cheer Kunitz's poem on a beached whale, which had been delivered in a Yeatsian high-pitched drone. The drift of the evening was, as might be expected, "poetry as life vs. the bomb as death." Practical considerations, and other political issues, were largely skirted.

The new issue of *Poetry East* is a special number titled "Art & Guns: Political Poetry at Home and Abroad," and it opens with a symposium on the Town Hall reading, which the editors believe to be "an important event in American literary history." All of the participating poets, except Bly and Merwin, have contributed statements, and Kinnell is interviewed on the significance of the evening.

Judging from the statements, the poets all considered the reading to be a valuable political gesture—many of them comparing it to the readings held against the Vietnam War. Baraka believes that the "social responsibility" and "positive stance" taken by the poets will lead to "dynamic, socially relevant poetry" in the years to come. Kinnell, on the other hand, states that the nuclear issue is "so basic" that even a "non-political" poet can be "political" on the subject. Knight, covering both ends with a bit of candor, claims he participated because "1) my good friend, Galway Kinnell, asked me to, and 2) it was an opportunity for me to put my/ass/where my/words had been."

This needs some sorting out. First, the anti-nuke movement, as articulated by the poets at Town Hall and by the nearly one million demonstrators in the streets of New York two weeks later, was limited to an expression of disgust at the prospect of nuclear war. The rally and the reading were "against the end of the world"—an endorsement of the continuance rather than the extinction of the human and other species.

To my mind, this is a philosophical position, not a political one. As such, it has attracted nearly everyone in the West (everyone, that is, except those in power) from pacifists to mass-murderers like William Colby. Contrary to Knight, it is attractive precisely because one does *not*, at this stage, have to put one's ass on the line. To be simply against the end of the world is not necessarily to challenge the state of the world.

The self-congratulatory tone of the reading and of the *Poetry East* statements—the delusion that the poets were actually *doing* something—is depressing. I suspect, unpleasantly, that this is the first movement to generally capture the hearts of poets since the Vietnam War not because it is the paramount issue of our time, but rather, as Kinnell hints, because it allows the non-political to *seem* political, without affecting the poetry itself and without jeopardizing university positions or government grant patronage. The poet can continue to do exactly what he/she was doing before, but with an added veneer of irony or poignancy. If the Town Hall reading is any indication, then we're in for the same old poem about a daffodil, but now that daffodil will be seen in implicit (unspoken) contrast to the destruction of all daffodils. It's the same old poem about a beached whale, but now the beached whale is us.

Whether Baraka is correct that the antinuke passion will lead to socially responsible poetry (not to mention action) remains to be seen. The poets, on the evidence so far, are still at the stage of philosophical speculation: thinking about the unthinkable, choosing life against death. What is notably absent is political thought: how the end of the world is to be prevented; how the nuclear madness, while we are still alive, affects the lives of the poets and the life of poetry in this country.

The Town Hall reading benefited the groups that are endorsing a freeze in the production of nuclear weapons. It is an admirable, though rudimentary, first step. If the freeze occurred today, it would still leave the world with some 10,170 American and 7,400 Soviet nuclear warheads, not to mention those of England, China, France, and probably

Israel and South Africa. Each of those warheads is from 1,000 to 600,000 times the strength of the bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki; together, they could annihilate the populations of the earth and six or seven other earths.

Obviously it is beyond the freeze that the poets and all of us have to think, for the disarmament of the world requires a kind of consensual transformation of global society which has never happened in our history—and, never having happened, seems as unimaginable as the extinction of the species. It is impossible to unlearn what we know—especially now that bomb technology is fairly simple—and impossible that the world will declare, along with a few poets and mystical adepts, that there is a Knowledge Which Should Never Be Known. But it may be possible to end the Nuclear Age without blowing ourselves out of it. It would entail, however, the end of all nuclear activity, both military and domestic: not only the dismantling of the weapons but of everything that requires or generates the uranium and plutonium that are necessary for bomb production.

More immediate—and with more concrete consequence to our lives—is the attempt to cure the psychosis that is driving us toward the war that will end all war and peace. For 40 years the West, and particularly the United States, has been caught in a mass hysteria that all of us, believers and non-believers alike, suffer from daily. I am speaking of the madness of anticommunism. Not anticommunism as an intellection position—the criticism of one possible political/economic system—but anticommunism as a religious crusade, the equation of communism with the Enemy, with Satan.

We have our nuclear arsenal in the name of anticommunism; we kill, directly or indirectly, hundreds of people every day in shifting sections of the world in the name of anticommunism; we give billions to murderers abroad because any enemy of our Enemy is our friend. One-fourth of all American children live in poverty because of anticommunism. Because of anticommunism our government spends more on the food for the dogs of Army officers than on the school lunches for our children. Because of anticommunism we play this global video game where, just as in the arcades, one never wins but only postpones defeat.

Given the Manichean vision of this American (and Soviet, in its mirror image) madness, the obvious needs to be stated: to believe that the Marxist (or, more exactly, Marxish) states have generally failed does not make one an anticommunist. And to be appalled by anticommunism does not make one a communist. Anticommunism is the delusion that there is an Other who must be destroyed if we are to live. Further, it is the delusion that there is no end to those Others, that anyone may become, or already is, one of Them. Worse, it is a delusion we only partially or selectively believe. (For example China, where yesterday's Peril is today's Potential Market.) At present we or our surrogates are murdering people in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua to stop the "spread of Soviet domination." We supposedly fight these little wars because the big war is too terrifying. But—even if we accept the idiotic notion that every struggle against injustice originates

in Moscow—do we really want to defeat or destroy the Soviet Union? What would happen if, tomorrow, the Soviets had no nuclear weapons while we retained all of ours? What would we do—blow them up? invade and arbitrarily restore capitalism? (Here, Ivan, you now own this boiler plate factory.)

Of course not. Wars are fought for two reasons: 1) to repel foreign aggression, and 2) to help business. (The second reason, with the notable exception of the Opium War, is usually masked by ideology.) At the moment, there may be hundreds of millions who detest the U.S., but the U.S. has no active enemies. No one realistically threatens our shores. For American business, the form of government of any foreign nation barely matters. We are as happy trading with Hungary as with South Africa, with Libya as with Switzerland. (For their part, the so-called hostile nations are only hostile to American ownership of national enterprises.) We are no longer fighting to keep the world safe for American business. And, when we prop up the likes of Ríos Montt or Pinochet and attempt to overthrow the Sandinistas, we are no longer fighting to preserve democratic ideals. What we are doing is endlessly expanding our arsenal at the expense of our own citizens and randomly devastating sections of the globe for absolutely no reason at all. We are doing it because we are crazy; and it is anticommunism that has made us crazy.

And where are the poets in all this? The same issue of *Poetry East* includes a survey of literary magazine editors on the question of "poetry, politics and publishing." Their responses range from a not favorable citation of Brecht's "What times are these, when to talk about trees is almost a crime?" to a not unfavorable citation of Maxine Kumin's "Poetry is too fragile an art for polemic." (Oh, brother.) Most of the replies fall into the usual "good/bad politics does not necessarily mean good/bad poetry" conundrum. Utterly missing are the considerations that the poet may also be a citizen (capable of activities other than writing poetry) and that the poet may also be a writer (capable of writing something other than poetry). Typical of the responses is this, quoted in its entirety: "Politics is knife and fork. Art is chopsticks." Cute, beside the point, but also incorrect: Today politics is a knife and art is a single chopstick.

We need to start thinking about what the Bomb has done to poetry. The question is no longer "After Auschwitz can anything be written?" but rather, "Before Armageddon can anything be written?" For one, it has destroyed the central myth all poets live by: "Whether or not I am read today, future generations may read me." American poetry has been largely written for the unborn; nuclear war, more than the death of the living, means the obliteration of the future living—or, to speak for a moment from narrow self-interest, the abolition of a potential readership. I suspect that the denial of posterity has partially led to the current personality cult in poetry: the readings that are more stand-up comedy monologues than poetry, the magazines that feature photographs of the poets larger than the poems themselves, the hustling and general atmosphere of "get it while you can," the absence of polemic and fear of toe-treading.

Moreover, American poetry, especially that written by those born after 1945—the Irradiated Generation—seems to be written if not in an ivory tower then in a gompa: a community of like souls in a remote mountain fastness. Worse, they are communities addicted to whimsey, nostalgia, preciosity. There is a longing for the days of Dada, a longing for Surrealism, a longing for the return of Coyote. Fleeting insights are netted and pinned to the page. On the aesthetic right, poetry is seen as a medium suitable only for anecdote and reminiscences of summer camp. On the aesthetic left, there is a talking in tongues, as though the Pentecostal fire had truly descended. It is, almost all of it, a poetry written from a Confucian wisdom—when the times are bad, head for the hills—that is no longer applicable. In the nuclear age, there are no hills, no world to be in reclusion *from*. Herakleitos seems more to the point: "You cannot hide from that which will not go away."

We need to start thinking about the poets' dependence on the military state: the transformation, in the early '70s, from the poet as the traditional enemy of the state to the poet as ward of the state, our private lives and our publications to a great extent dependent on government handouts—the few dollars that happened not to have been fed into the war machine. We need to reconsider the poets' role in the English Dept., working next door to the nuclear strategists. (To cite one example: how do we reconcile the fact that one of the finest publishers of poetry, the University of California, is also the designer of *all* nuclear warheads?) We need to end our isolation, not from an abstract "the people," but from the world. (The last generation of poets to travel extensively in the Third World were those of *The New American Poets* anthology. It shows in the work.) The insanity of anticommunism can only be cured when America sees that the demon is only human, as we have in China. We need points as witnesses: to see the struggles for self-determination, to see the workings of the communist states, and to tell us what they saw. (I attribute the popularity of Carolyn Forché to the fact that she is the only one to do precisely that in El Salvador.) We need to reassess our utilization of the small public we have: in the classrooms and in the reading halls, and through our presses. (Menard Press in England, for example, has completely stopped publishing poetry, and is now devoted exclusively to antinuke material—a move I imagine most poets would find scandalous.) Above all, we need to reexamine the reigning dogma that what a poet does is write poetry to the exclusion of all else.

There is no answer to the good/bad politics/poetry conundrum—that is, there are only individual solutions. Exemplary cases are the poets who were Communist Party members in the 1930s. Most of them—Hikmet, MacDiarmid, Neruda, among so many others—chose to write political poetry: cries of rage or exhortations to arms. Some of it remains poetry worth reading; most of it does not. It was a gamble that immediate effect could also have enduring value; a gamble undertaken in the belief that poetry served the cause. (Today of course "enduring value" is itself a dubious proposition.)

There were other solutions: César Vallejo chose to continue writing the poetry he wrote, hardly accessible to the masses and more artifacts of a political sensibility than political statements themselves, but he served the Party by turning out a great deal of dogmatic prose (some of which has recently become available in English translation: *The Mayakovsky Case* and *Autopsy on Surrealism,* both published as "Art on the Line" pamphlets by Curbstone Press). It is a prose that could have been written by anybody ("The social revolution is being seeded with the blood and battles of the proletarian class, and the front which embodies that class is none other than that of the Bolsheviks, vanguard of the working masses.") but the point is that Vallejo felt it had to be written, that it should be written in prose rather than compromise the poetry, and that it could be written without compromising the poetry.

Another position taken by a major poet and Party member was that of George Oppen, who chose to stop writing altogether and to devote himself to organizing:

> I didn't believe in political poetry or poetry as being politically efficacious. I didn't even believe in the honesty of a man saying, "Well, I'm a poet and I will make my contribution to the cause by writing poems about it." I don't believe that's any more honest than to make wooden nutmegs because you happen to be a woodworker.

The performance of the poets at Town Hall makes Oppen's argument persuasive: "Here's my wooden nutmeg against the end of the world." But the example of certain poets during the Vietnam War proves that it is quite possible to be simultaneously a political poet, a non-political poet, a writer of political prose, and an activist citizen. There is no doubt that poetry honorably served the antiwar movement,[1] and, in its interaction of the arts and the political necessities, the movement served poetry. Will this happen again—or will the poets remain up in the gompa, chanting into the wind until the firestorm blows the songs away?

—Eliot Weinberger

[1]While the influence of the antiwar movement on ending the war remains debatable, it has recently been discovered that the movement inadvertently kept the world from blowing up. According to the memoirs of both Nixon and Haldeman, in the fall of 1969 Nixon instructed Kissinger to inform the North Vietnamese that, if they did not accept his terms for a settlement, the U.S. would introduce nuclear weapons into the war. The deadline ws November 1 and it was no bluff—the plans were drawn, and they included at least one target that was a mile and a half from the Chinese border. The North Vietnamese ignored the threat, and Nixon was persuaded not to carry out the plan for, he claims, only one reason: the October 15 Vietnam Moratorium and the November 15 Washington March Against Death. He correctly perceived that the country would not tolerate such a move and, as he tells it, the war then dragged on for years later, thanks to the antiwar movement. Seen from the other side, had there been no antiwar movement, global extinction might already have occurred.

QUESTIONS FOR HAYDEN CARRUTH
(re: the Harrison review in *Sulfur* #7)

"I think of those who wrote honest, beautiful, important poems thirty-five to forty years ago, Ruthven Todd, Byron Vazakis, Reuel Denney, so many others, whose names linger, if they linger at all, only among a few of us fond and ravaged codgers. It is an oppressive digression."

Why did you fail to think of Todd, Vazakis and Denney in 1970 when you edited your anthology *The Voice That Is Great Within Us*? At the time you thought of Thomas Hornsby Ferril, Hy Sobiloff, Mitchell Goodman, Bill Anderson, Patricia Low, Lou Lipsitz and David Lawson. Are their poems more "honest, beautiful, important" than those of Todd, Vazakis and Denney?

"In discouragement Harrison turned to writing fiction, which was tough too, but of the macho, escapist kind, I think, a serious enough deviation, such as one can find in some of his poetry as well. . . ."

Does your "I think" refer to Harrison's "macho" fiction or his "deviation"? If it refers to the former it is not clear that you have read his novels. If it refers to the latter it suggests that Harrison deviated from poetry into "escapist" fiction because he was discouraged at the reception of his poetry. In fact Harrison had published one novel before writing *Letters To Yesenin*, and in that poem ("Letter 9") he writes:

> A manuscript of
> a novel sits in front of me held together with twenty clips.
> It is the paper equivalent of a duck and a company far away
> has bought this perhaps beautiful duck and my time is free again.

Does this suggest "discouragement" to you? How do you read these lines?

If as you sit shivve over American poetry you forget poets when you have the chance to remember them what are we to do? And if you treat a poet you praise like the incarnation of the F. Scott-Fitzgerald-goes-to-Hollywood cliché how are we instructed? What profit can there be in your crocodile tears?

—*William Corbett*

Notes on "Lévi-Strauss and the Dragon"
CHRIS KNIGHT
(*Man*, March 1983)

As Chris Knight is turning modern male-oriented anthropology on its head with what amounts to a radical feminist thesis, it is good to see the first instalment of this important work published in the prestigious but oddly-named *Man: Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*.

What he is saying is that at some time in the past women lived in the kind of kinship proximity that enabled them to synchronise their menstrual periods. This menstrual synchrony beat out a great cultural pulse, the two peaks of which were the surges of energy produced by ovulation on the one hand and menstruation on the other. This is the beat which underlies the establishment of human society. At the two culminations, one relating to birth and a relationship to the husband, and the other, menstruation, relating to a return to the womb and inter-feminine values, two different sets of cultural structures arose. Both have been altered and perverted, indeed inverted, by the men, who are not able to participate directly in these experiences, and have therefore sought to take them over, direct how and when women should give birth, and conceal the positive sides of the menstrual energy. In particular, the female solidarity which enabled women to undergo these experiences with the support and participation of their sisters has by and large been forbidden by the men. In Australian aboriginal society, for example, the men believed that the association of women in these ways would be visited by the various disasters said to be brought down by the power of the great Rainbow Serpent, principally floods brought about by an endless rainy season.

In *Man* Chris Knight demonstrates that the Rainbow Serpent, far from being the visitation of the angry male phallic God, is in its origin a myth which declares this very solidarity of the women. He very movingly reinterprets the famous myth of the Wawilak sisters and certain rock-paintings in the light of the menstrual experience. They clearly can have no other meaning once the shared menstrual experience is understood to have a positively celebratory side, and need not be the sad and solitary concealed thing that so many women have found it in almost every society we know of.

It is strange that, having stolen the women's celebration and emblem of their joy, the great snake of the rainbow that took them up to heaven, the men then engaged in secret ceremonies of their own that are cruel parodies of the women's bloodshed. That women can truly synchronise their periods by close proximity is certainly a scientific fact.

It is possible that the rhythms of menstruation can be entrained by the moon, and the celebration of an external rhythm which corresponded to internal events would be another binding force in this fundamental celebration.

These ideas parallel arguments we put forward in *The Wise Wound* (Marck 1978), a fact which Chris Knight has generously acknowledged to us. What he is doing, however, is to build up a mountain of new evidence on similar themes, which he is treating with a good deal of originality and brilliance. I understand that a book is being written which assembles evidence from many cultures, and we look forward to this. It should be truly revolutionary. The parts we have so far read of this work in progress fully support the exciting and radical nature of the preliminary arguments in the article. The masculine science, anthropology, will surely through Chris Knight's work be making some amends for its long neglect of the feminine.

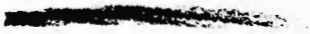
An important theme of the work in progress is that the Serpent, or Dragon, that is so familiar in world mythology, which devours maidens and which threatens romantic love, has its basis in the power of menstrual blood to return the woman to her own nature, and to separate her from her husband's masculine concerns. The Dragon may signify, in Chris Knight's own words, "the power of blood to reclaim women periodically from their husbands." Then the stories of the slaying of dragons would refer to the establishment of marriage in its modern form, that is, as a permanent bond, without the exclusively feminine menstrual events being thought a significant factor. "Women's blood-links are ruptured: the dragon is slain."

I don't know whether Chris Knight follows the pathway of the menstrual Rainbow Serpent into the imagery of sexual alchemy. Obviously the Serpent rites among the aboriginals were a way of establishing and celebrating by the women the fact of the woman's fertility, and that this would involve the most intense communion between the women involved: a communion which the men attempted to imitate by cutting arms and legs and genitals and wallowing in the blood. The women's rites would establish and stimulate a fundamental quality in human nature: the fertility rhythm. If the moon does act as an entraining stimulus of this human rhythm, tuned into by the women, then the women's rites were celebrations also of a great natural event: the dying and reburth of the moon in its phases. This would be felt and not merely seen, that human nature and nature could co-exist in continuum and communion would be known at the deepest level. The image of the wise serpent and the rainbow colours, the rainbow body, the peacock's tail, is so widespread in mythology, folklore and literature, from alchemy to Tantra, even in Dante, that perhaps it refers also to a direct individual experience which can be described and experienced in no other way than by this feminine alchemy and by intercourse of the kind that results from the liberation of menstrual energy. If this is so, then the poet Robert Graves may have been prophetic in writing of the Black Goddess, an emblem of the woman in her dark or secret menstrual phase: "the Black Goddess is so far hardly more than a

word of hope whispered. . . . She promises a new pacific bond between men and women, corresponding to a final reality. . . in which the patriarchal marriage bond will fade away. . . back to that sure instinct. . .which [man] long ago forfeited by intellectual pride."

— *Peter Redgrove and Penelope Shuttle*

It is hoped that a new paperback edition of *The Wise Wound* will shortly be issued in the United States by Spring Books in Dallas, Texas.



HERMIT WITH STICK

Han Yu (768–824) is better known as a renovator of prose and as an acerbic polemicist than as a poet. Historians recall his attacks on Buddhism and the vicissitudes of his political career, which took him from University to exile, and from exile, after an "abject apology," to high positions in the Ministery of War and in the Imperial Metropolitan Government. Literary critics praise the purity and vigor of his prose; laymen, such as myself, love the strange humor of his short essays, such as the "Address to the Crocodiles." Nevertheless, the poetry of Han Yu is no less notable than his prose, although the majority of Chinese critics have accepted it with a certain resistance. This aversion is due to the fact that his poems frequently deviate from the mainstream of Chinese poetic tradition. A.C. Graham, in his excellent *Poems of the Late T'ang*, cites the opinion of Liu Hsi-tsai, a 19th-century critic: "Han Yu had the power to make the ugly beautiful." This definition approaches that of Western taste, above all of modern expressionism, and it is strange that—unlike Tu Fu, Po Chu-i or Su Shih—Han Yu has not attracted more translators. This neglect becomes stranger when we consider the opinion of another Sinologist, Charles

Hartman, who writes, "Han Yu fulfilled the three requirements which, according to T.S. Eliot, are necessary for a great poet: abundance, variety and absolute mastery."

In his famous "Memorial on the Bone of Buddha," Han Yu reproached the Emperor himself: "The Buddha was born a barbarian; he was unacquainted with the language of the Middle Kingdom, and his dress was of a different cut. His tongue did not speak nor was his body clothed in the manner prescribed by the kings of old; he knew nothing of the duty of minister to prince or the relationship of son to father. Were he still alive today, were he to come to court at the bidding of his country, your majesty would give him no greater reception than an interview in the Strangers' Hall, a ceremonial banquet, and the gift of a suit of clothes, after which you would have sent him under guard to the frontier to prevent him from misleading your people. There is then all the less reason now that he has been dead so long for allowing this decayed and rotten bone, this filthy and disgusting relic to enter the Forbidden Palace. *I stand in awe of supernatural beings*, said Confucius, ***but keep them at a distance.***" (trans. J.K. Rideout) In spite of the violence of his Confucian beliefs, Han Yu felt a certain attraction to Buddhism. He resembles those Mexican priest-eaters who spend years in the Chamber of Deputies demanding the head of the Archbishop while secretly sending their daughters to convents in Canada and France.

Han Yu's fascination with Buddhism—or, as he would put it, his distant awe—is apparent in a few of his poems. For example, in the first line of a poem on a withered tree, he alludes simultaneously to the hollowness of its trunk and to the Buddhist void (sunyata). The allusion would provoke an immediate response in Oriental readers, for Han Yu employs, to designate the central hollow of the tree, a word that is the name of a popular sutra. The tree, says the poet literally, still does not care to be only the void at its heart. The sutra most loved and recited in the Far East is precisely the *Heart* (the center, the nucleus, the essence) *Sutra of Perfect Wisdom* (Prajña-pāramitā-hrdaya-sūtra). Its doctrine may be summarized by a few lines: "Form is emptiness and emptiness is form... where there is form there is emptiness; where there is emptiness there is form; and the same is true for sensations and sentiments, for perceptions and passions, for consciousness." The last line of the poem rests on a double ambiguity that is frequent in the texts of Mahayana Buddhism: center (of the tree)=center (of the mind, hollowness (of the trunk)=void (of the spirit). Here is a version of the poem, inspired by the two translations Graham has done:

Un árbol seco

An árbol sin renuevos, sin follajes:
no lo injurian heladas ni ventiscas.
Su panza es cueva donde cabe un hombre,
es un manto de hormigas su corteza.
No lo visitan pájaros: su huésped
es el moho que dura una mañana.

Pero su leña es llama que habla en lenguas
y es santa vacuidad su tronco hueco.

A withered tree

A tree without shoots, without leaves:
no frost nor storm can harm it.
Its belly is a cave where a man could fit,
its bark a robe of ants.
Birds do not visit; its only guest
is the mould that lasts a morning.
But its wood is a flame that speaks in tongues
and its hollow trunk the sacred void.

A confession: I have not resisted the temptation, in the penultimate line, of forcing Christian heterodoxy onto the withered tree. Han Yu says that its wood will serve to make a good fire. I have changed that fire into tongues and thus have made it speak like a man possessed by the Spirit. Those upon whom the spiritual fire descends—the paradigm is the Pentecost of the Evangelists—"speak in tongues." But those tongues are unknown and untranslatable. No one understands them, not even those who speak them (glossolalia). For this reason, Saint Paul, in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, warns the faithful of the danger of speaking in "unknown" tongues. "For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit may be praying, but my mind is barren." If Han Yu, the intransigent, could read my translation, he would shake his head in reproach: not only is it written in barbaric characters, it also purveys a heresy.

— *Octavio Paz*
(trans. Eliot Weinberger)

SOME EXPERIMENTS IN ETHNOGRAPHIC POLYPHONY

Two titles have now appeared in a four-volume edition of documents collected by James Walker, a physician and ethnographer on the Pine Ridge Sioux Reservation between 1896 and 1914. The first (James Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, Raymond

DeMallie and Elaine Jahner eds., U. of Nebraska Press, 1980) is a collage of notes, interviews, texts and essay fragments written or spoken by Walker and numerous Oglala collaborators. This volume lists more than thirty "authorities;" and wherever possible each contribution is marked with the name of its enunciator, writer, or transcriber. These individuals are not ethnographic "informants." *Lakota Belief* is a collaborative work of documentation, edited in a manner that gives equal rhetorical weight to diverse renditions of tradition. Walker's own descriptions and glosses are fragments among fragments.

The ethnographer worked closely with Charles and Richard Nines, interpreters, and with Thomas Tyon and George Sword, both of whom composed extended essays in Old Lakota. These are now translated and published for the first time. In a long section of *Lakota Belief* Tyon presents explanations he obtained from a number of Pine Ridge shamans; and it is revealing to see questions of belief (for example the crucial and elusive quality of "wakan") interpreted in differing, idiosyncratic styles. The result is a version of culture in process, that resists any systematic summation. In *Lakota Belief* the editors provide biographical details on Walker, with hints about the particular sources of the writings in his collection, brought together from the Colorado Historical Society, the American Museum of Natural History, and the American Philosophical Society.

The second volume to appear is *Lakota Society* (DeMallie ed., 1982) which assembles documents roughly relating to aspects of social organization, as well as concepts of time and history. The inclusion of extensive Winter Counts (Lakota annals) and personal recollections of historical events will confirm recent tendencies to question overly-clear distinctions between peoples "with" and "without" history. (See, for example, Renato Rosaldo, *Ilongot Headhunting 1883-1974* Stanford U. Press, 1980) Volume three will be devoted to Lakota myth. And the last volume will contain the translated writings of George Sword. Sword was an Oglala warrior, later a judge of the Court of Indian Offenses at Pine Ridge. With Walker's encouragement, he wrote a detailed vernacular record of customary life, covering myth, ritual, warfare and games, complemented by an autobiography.

Taken together, the four volumes will provide an unusual, multiply-articulated record of Lakota culture at a crucial moment in its history—a three-volume anthology of *ad hoc* interpretations and transcriptions by more than a score of individuals occupying a spectrum of positions with respect to "tradition," plus an elaborated view of the ensemble by a well-placed Oglala writer. To this heterogeneous collection we can also conveniently add the 1979 reprint (AMS Press, N.Y.) of Walker's classic monograph of 1917, *The Sun Dance and Other Ceremonies of the Oglala Division of the Teton Sioux.* It will thus be possible to assess critically the synthesis Walker made of these diverse materials. When complete, the five volumes will constitute an expanded (dispersed, not total) text representing a particular *moment* of ethnographic production (not "Lakota culture").

Such an ensemble opens up new readings and desires—in an ongoing cultural poesis. For the decision to publish these texts was provoked by requests to the Colorado

Historical Society from community members at Pine Ridge, where copies were needed in Oglala history classes. For *Sulfur* readers the "Walker Collection" offers other lessons, providing, among other things, a mock-up for an ethnopoetics with history (and individuals) in it. One has difficulty giving these materials (many of which are very beautiful) the timeless, impersonal identity of, say, "Sioux myth." Moreover, the question of *who writes* (performs? transcribes? translates? edits?) cultural statements is inescapable in an expanded text of this sort. Here the ethnographer no longer holds unquestioned rights of salvage: the authority long associated with bringing (elusive, usually "disappearing") oral lore into legible textual form. It is unclear whether James Walker (or anyone) can appear as author of these writings. Such lack of clarity about ethnographic authority is a sign of the times.

Western texts conventionally come with authors attached. Thus it is still, perhaps, inevitable that *Lakota Belief* and *Lakota Society* should be published under Walker's name. However, as ethnography's complex, plural poesis becomes more apparent—and politically charged—conventions begin, in small ways, to slip. This is visible on two recent title pages: *Birds of My Kalam Country,* by Ralph Bulmer and Ian Majnep (Auckland, London 1977) and *Piman Shamanism and Staying Sickness (Ka:cim Mumkidag)* by Donald Bahr, anthropologist; Juan Gregorio, shaman; David I. Lopez, interpreter; Albert Alvarez, editor (Tucson, 1974). *Birds of My Kalam Country,* the fruit of a long collaboration between ethnographer and informant (but it would probably be better to say, simply, Australian and New Guinean) is a hybrid, interwoven work, with the two contributors distinguished throughout by different typefaces. *Piman Shamanism*'s four authors (one is tempted to say "author functions") are listed without obvious hierarchy (though not in alphabetical order). And the book is consciously designed "to transfer *to a shaman* as many as possible of the functions normally associated with authorship." Bahr, initiator of the project, opts to share out authority to a considerable degree. Gregorio appears as principal source for the "theory of disease" transcribed and translated at two separate levels by Lopez and Alvarez, both of whom are Papago Indians (the latter trained in linguistics). Gregorio's vernacular texts include highly compressed explanations which are interpreted and contextualized by Bahr's separate commentary. The book is unusual in its textual enactment of the interpretation of interpretations. (For a poetic extrapolation of Gregorio's "theory," cut with Mallarmé, see Gustaf Sobin's important "The Earth as Air," *Conjunctions* 2.)

A different example of multi-vocality is provided by New Wilderness Poetics' *Maria Sabina: Her Life and Chants* (Ross-Erikson, 1981), where the project of giving voice to a Mazalec shaman results in a colloquy of six (at least). Maria Sabina herself speaks with two quite different accents, one for her matter-of-fact autobiography, the other when possessed of language in amazing, ecstatic chants. And she is accompanied by a knowledgeable Escort (Gordon Wasson, Munn, Estrada, Rothenberg) who introduce,

justify, comment, and extrapolate. The process of "giving voice" occurs in a faceted context of interpretations and rewritings. There is no direct access to Maria Sabina's authentic voice, or voices (the constant evocation of "language" in her chants says as much); and these enunciations, transcriptions and translations are all complexly historical. With *Maria Sabina* ethnopoetics appears to struggle away from logocentrism and through the manifest staging of its discourses, "native" and otherwise.

The historical dimensions of cultural poesis are given full political significance by *'Aré'aré: un peuple mélanésien et sa musique,* par Daniel de Coppet et Hugo Zemp, avec des textes 'aré'aré et un disque (Editions du Seuil, 1978). This handsomely edited book (But in what sense is it, properly speaking, a book?) is largely constructed from statements by inhabitants of Southern Malaita in the Solomon Islands. It is illustrated with numerous photos and includes a brief "portrait of 'aré'aré society" by DeCoppet and Zemp, along with a postface by David Kausimae, Deputy from the region and Vice-President of the Legislative Assembly. The book was published during the year of the Solomon Islands' independence from British rule, and it was submitted to various villages and the "'Aré 'aré Council" for comment and approval. The collected statements vary in tone and ethnographic "distance." As presented, they amount to a forward-looking defense of custom. Some are myths, songs and stories, other describe and explain crucial elements of 'aré 'aré tradition—particularly the "pan pipes," bamboo flutes of varying size and musical scale played by men at festivals and during funeral cycles, evoking subtle emotions of love and sadness. *'Aré 'aré* is an explicit rendition of culture as musical polyphony, a counterpoint of social groups, tools, the living and the dead, work cycles, festivals, peaceful and violent exchanges. Its collection ends with a statement by Ariki Nono'ohimae Eerehau, 'aré'aré "Custom Chief," tracing the history, since 1943, of cultural resistance to British rule, the "reestablishment of our customs and our own laws," formal recognition of genealogies and land rights, etc. He expresses a view of cultural authenticity that is evidently shared by his ethnographer co-authors. We must, he urges, defend our custom from all attempts to break or replace it. "And on the other hand, we declare that if, among the new institutions coming from outside, there are those which seem to fit our program, we're ready to give them our support." Ethnographic (self) representation, as performed in this book, evidently qualified for appropriation. It provides outsiders with an eloquent, surprising, idealized, and largely male, view of a non-disappearing local polity. (It is now blatant that there are no complete or politically-neutral versions of a culture.)

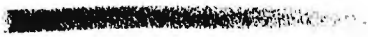
Two comparable Melanesian examples of ethnographic invention come finally to mind: J.-M. Tjibaou, et. al., *Kanaké: Mélanésien de la Nouvelle Calédonie* (Librarie Hachette, 1977); and the dialogically constructed film "by" Jerry Leach and Gary Kildea, "Trobriand Cricket: an Ingenious Response to Colonialism."

Signs of the times: *Sulfur* readers will think of others. Today, ethnography and

ethnopoetics deliver contingent encounters (contacts and contracts) instead of essences, or timeless traditions. They begin and end, as always, in exchanges like the following (James Walker talking with Finger, "a distinguished shaman"):

— You say the Rock is the grandfather of all things and the Earth the grandmother of all things. Are the Rock and the Earth as a man and wife?
— Some shamans think they are, and some think they are not.

—James Clifford



The Well-Tempered Sentence: A Punctuation Handbook for the Innocent, the Eager, and The Doomed.
KAREN ELIZABETH GORDON.
Ticknor & Fields. 1983

An old poet related with pleasure one time a story about James Joyce spending an entire morning removing a comma from a particular passage, then spending that afternoon reinstalling the same comma in the same place. It's a story not hard to believe about Joyce, and though most people would regard this interest in a comma as morbid and extreme, and the activity of that fretful day as a model of malingering, that a poet should recount this sort of fastidiousness with appreciation is quite natural.

Punctuation, as Karen Elizabeth Gordon says in the Introduction to her handbook of punctuation, *The Well-Tempered Sentence*, cuts up time. This cutting up of time is a very big item for musicians, and it ought to be for poets too.

For a poet, the handling of time becomes a very intimate, *hands-on* business. Each word is a *shape carved in time*, consonants moving against space sharply or bluntly, trippingly or broken-backed. Some words are big, old DeSotos; some are low-slung DeLoreans. Vowels have their varying durations and pitches: *eek! what a weird moon.* Combined you get a word like *Guelph,* which is also a town in Ontario.

If people don't read poetry much these days, and I wonder about that, it's because what they find in journals and books, here, in Canada and England, is flat. It don't move,

no way, no how. In truth, folks don't ask so very much from poetry. They'll reproduce some idiot shampoo jingle because, despite the stupid, grating lyrics and tune, it has a distinct rhythm, with the rhyme on time. We humans, for whatever reason, have in our brains a zone hospitable to the ditty and nursery rhyme, to rhythms in language, a language music that adheres to certain patterns and the repetition of those patterns.

An idea drops to the river bottom without the music to ride on—in a poem that is. Some of the poets who were interesting 20 years ago have become so infatuated with their idea of things that they have left their wheels at home. All poets worth their salt find a *sound* of their own, or work through to it, having begun with the sound of someone else or of a group of someone elses. Poets will give forth on the subject of measure and musicality at great length, but next to none of them does much about it. It's hard to do; that's why. It's so hard to do that twangers and synthesizers are all the rage—rather like sex aids or those Japanese piano bars where one can be Merle Haggard or Frank Sinatra.

One of the tools in orchestrating movement in language, signs as to where you want the poem to stop or pause, degrees thereof, or tear-off sideways, is punctuation. When you see it abandoned by a poet the reason is, usually, that he/she is too lazy or ignorant to identify the stops and pauses for the reader. He probably doesn't know himself. After all, poetry is a devil to punctuate: the ellipses, switchbacks, the truncated idea dissolving in space. But so far as I can make out, there exists punctuation for any strange turn you might take, and at some point you had better sit down and learn it.

For the poet, commas, semi-colons, colons, dashes and ellipses are good to get under your belt. The most treacherous among these is the comma. For instance, there is a comma in this sentence (all sentences providing illustration by Ms. Gordon):

> She greeted him with open, entrenching arms.

But not in this sentence:

> Her dull gold eyelids lifted heavily and fluttered one final coquettish farewell.

The colon, that bruising stop, comes here:

> I've led a sheltered life: I've gone from shelter to shelter.

The dash is a pip for poets:

> Last night as we slept together for the last time—where were you anyway?
>
> More than just a book—it's a major piece of torture.
>
> It was twilight—if ever there was a time to match that word—and the

stars were beginning to rear their shiney heads...

The semi-colon, a personal favorite (and well-written of in an anomalous essay of Lewis Thomas, "Notes on Punctuation") can play bluff with the period or comma while you oversee the matter like someone from the French Academy. But for some standarized uses:

> Sit down; I'll make us some coffee and some suspirations.
>
> Visions, on the one hand, devour my brain; hyenas, on the other, feed on yours.
>
> Jacob, who was sitting on the balcony, watching her out of the corner of his steel-gray eye, lunged forward to touch her as she passed by; but someone grabbed a fistful of his collar from behind and said, "Lay off my woman, you jerk."

And the ellipses:

> Many of us remember the opening lines of Lolita: "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps..." But who has memorized other memorable passages from the book?

Ms. Gordon uses lots of these silly, sexy sentences, of her own concocting and of a number of other writers she's plundered for grammatical curiosities and pure weirdness, from Henri Michaux to Robert Kelly (incidentally, do you know why there's a comma after the word *silly*? why *incidentally* is not capitalized?) and they're quite good, many of them. (Ought there to be a colon instead of a period after *them*? And now I don't recall if a period in this case goes inside or outside the parenthesis...)...

> You filthifier of English dreams!

What a splendid way to illustrate the exclamation point!

The author, in her picture on the book's cover flap, resembles Erica Jong. But for all Ms. Gordon's fascination with commas, etc., embedded in suggestive places, she is never so compulsive, vapid or gross as the older, more renowned woman.

—August Kleinzahler

Broken Off by the Music
JOHN YAU.
Burning Deck. 1981

In some respects, the title of John Yau's recent book is a synecdoche for the rest of the work. *Broken Off by the Music* seems to perform what it describes; it is a fragment, "broken off" from something else, subordinate to a clause of which it is the interruption. In the book itself, such phrases are used to establish momentary frames that are quickly re-contextualized. The overall movement of the book is one of continual readjustment and substitution, an interplay of semantic and rhetorical codes without the benefit of some coherent narrative:

> Roof shaped like a strawberry. Hurriedly torn
> paper towel. The queen's staircase does not
> lead to the king's chambers. The traditional
> requirements of comfort and convenience.
> A kind of sleepwalking echoed by a line
> in history.
>
> (*p. 13*)

In this example, various strategies of interruption (enjambment, false modification, parataxis) displace any continuity that might exist between architecture ("roof shaped like a strawberry"), regal accommodations, ideas of "comfort and convenience" and sleepwalking. One could say, however, that there are *potential* relationships everywhere: between architecture and "chambers," between paper towels and "convenience," between royalty and history. This line of somewhat specious reasoning is very much to the larger point of Yau's purpose in the book.

This purpose, to put it rather bluntly, is to illustrate the relationships between logical coherence and the fictions of logic, between ideas of totality and randomness, between truth and necessity. As he says, "Only half the story is true. The rest / is necessary, like clouds on a cloudy day." In the book's first section, this "story" is unravelled around the life and work of Etienne-Louis Boullée (1728-99) whose plans for giant monuments and buildings (few of which were ever constructed) are among the more eccentric architectural projects of the eighteenth-century. The disparity between Boullée plans for monolithic structures and the practicality of their execution parallels Yau's own construction of visionary landscapes out of discontinuous fragments:

> Eeriness of a city with
> only one light on. A junkie dangling

from an alarm clock. Using the laundromat
because there were no bathrooms around.
Stealing the mermaid's cheese. Breaking
into her smile.

(*p.14*)

Throughout this opening section, Yau relies on subordinate clauses and phrases to create a highly tentative linguistic environment in which any possible antecedent is endlessly deferred. Places and events are linked not by narrative logic but by the consistency of rhetoric. And it is this tension between a highly controlled surface (sustained use of fragmentary materials, the prevalence of enjambment, the flatness of tone) and its discontinuous movement that so effectively dramatizes the issues of totality and arbitrariness, truth and necessity, architectural design and realized product.

If these are the crucial determinants of this book's opening section, they are even more in force in the next two groups of poems, "Late Night Movies" and "Notarikon." Here the dependent clause gives way to the complete sentence, but once again the broken narrative allows for complicated substitutions, "A Different Cereal," for example, opens innocuously enough:

The moon shrinks behind a row of shriveled trees.
An empty parking lot, a man reading a newspaper
inside an illuminated box. After reaching into
the cupboard, her hand closed its five fingernails
around a leatherbound volume. Later, the aspirin
would not dissolve in a spoon of water.

(*p.48*)

But within two stanzas, many of the terms are repeated in rather different forms:

The general quickly dissolved into a shriveled
cereal, his fingers scratching an empty box
of illuminated shrieks. Later, beneath
the rows of parking stars, a man grinds
an aspirin into the cement. When the wind
ripped the leaves from the trees, it was
as if murder slid out of the swamp.

(*p. 48*)

Such transformations offer the pleasures of a children's game where a story, once begun, may undergo delightful permutations based upon the throw of the dice. If the title of one of his sections is any indication ("Notarikon"), Yau seems to have derived some of his impulse toward substitution and recombination from accounts of Kabballistic mystical exegesis in which letters or whole words of the sacred text are interchanged to yield new meanings. According to Gershom Scholem, this form of speculation was divided into three

techniques, "*Gematria*, i.e. the calculation of the numerical value of Hebrew words and the search for connections with other words or phrases of equal value; *Notarikon*, or interpretation of the letters of a word as abbreviations of whole sentences; and *Temurah*, or interchange of letters according to certain systematic rules." *(Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism)* While Yau has not applied such ideas in any systematic sense, he has loosely adapted some of these techniques in the book's last two sections.

What this rather unsystematic use of systems affords for the book is a way of generating new and varied context for relatively undramatic materials. "Late Night Movies," as its title suggests, makes use of fragmentary descriptions of grade B films, but each increment is transformed, through substitution of syllable, word or phrase, until the incident described is virtually effaced:

> In a small undergound laboratory the brain of a
> movie actor is replaced by semi-precious stones,
> each one thought to have once resided in heaven.

Later, this becomes a new "movie" altogether:

> In a small laboratory in heaven the semi-precious
> thoughts of a movie actor are replaced by a brain.
> The ancient mask realized the insides of the
> archaeologist exuded a tincture of *Pisa*
> meant only for its dead inhabitant.
>
> (*p.31*)

The new materials, added to this second stanza, are themselves derived from other stanzas, each one generating materials for the rest. If it were simply a matter of finding new contexts for words or phrases, the work would quickly become predictable, but Yau manages to alter his materials within strict boundaries of tone and mood so that the flat, expository descriptions continually reveal hidden potentialities: the "laboratory" *is* a metaphor for the brain; "thoughts" *could be* the "semi-precious stones" of a brain, etc.

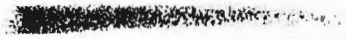
In a certain sense, this book has all of the pleasures and some of the risks of Boullée's own work, in that the poems are not meant to be lived in but simply admired as grand projects on the order of Tatlin's designs for monuments or Ives' unplayable music. The risk is that they may become a series of beautiful surfaces, handsome to look at but too fragile to bear the weight of sustained inhabitation. I would prefer to see them in terms of what John Ashbery, in a preface to Yau's previous book, *Sometimes*, calls an "alternate geography, one where the mountains are 'topped with dunce caps,' of course." In order to present a landscape, the poet takes two steps back and one to the left in order to see it for the first time—in this sense, Yau is not unlike Ashbery himself. The landscapes of *Broken Off by the Music* are made out of the utterly banal: a drugstore with

mahogany stools, a Wisconsin lagoon, a train station, a "room with open windows facing a street." One is inclined to call them "signs" of places since they seem to have been derived from customized representations of actual drugstores, lagoons and train stations. As such, they are infinitely manipulable—as capable of reformation as the personal associations that constellate around them:

> The perimeter of these suburbs was carefully outlined
> by chrome spigots. Lawns rose fiercely out of the snow,
> while paper bags seldom crossed the avenue. If a newspaper
> floated past a window, a pale hand clutched a withered foot.
> It was a time when the century had gone to sleep,
> and everyone glistened with pride.
>
> (*p. 42*)

There is a something Norman Rockwellish about this: a nostaligic look at places one has forgotten, but Yau infuses them with the uncanny (lawns rising "fiercely out of the snow"), so that they reveal a darker face of memory. Like Max Ernst's collages, the surfaces of these poems are recognizable but the terms of their combination are strange indeed. To adapt one of the poems from the book, Yau's language is "Like a rope dangling from / a tree, a site where there is / more conjecture than hard knowledge."

—Michael Davidson



The Life of John Berryman.
JOHN HAFFENDEN.
Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1982.

John Berryman was born John Smith in Oklahoma in 1914; his family moved to Tampa, Florida, when he was ten and it was there that his parents' quarrels, furious for years, ended when his father shot himself outside his son's bedroom window. Within a few weeks of her husband's suicide, Martha Smith married John Angus Berryman, a real estate agent who had been hanging around the house for some time. The poet-to-be took his step-father's name (ironically, in full), and the family moved to New York City where John was educated at Columbia, after which he attended Cambridge on a Fellowship, and via Yeats and Auden chose the poetic tradition that he would emulate.

When he returned to the States in 1938, he began a teaching career that along with his alcoholism, which developed in the late 40s, would dominate the rest of his life. While

he had long appointments at Princeton and the University of Minnesota, he taught at over sixteen schools until 1972 when he committed suicide by leaping from a bridge onto the embankment below. He was married three times, had three children, and after going through severe rehabilitation for drugs and alcohol, was received into Roman Catholicism, the faith of his childhood.

In his "Introductory," Haffenden states: "I have not attempted to explore the entire literary milieu, only the psychology of one man." Taken on these terms, the book strikes me as competent and fair. However, such an approach leads to a total emphasis on Berryman's personal problems and his social relationships with others. There is virtually nothing on his creative contacts (to the extent that we wonder if he had any), or the process by which a person transforms his experience into imagination. In fact, without exception, the only poetry quoted is used as biographical description. Given the narcissistic literality of his poetry, the biography ends up strongly implying that Berryman's poetry is nothing more than his own versified biography.

The life itself, from the mid-40s on, was a fulltime three-ring hell comprised of the Father, the Son and the Covering Mother. According to Haffenden, Berryman wrongly thought that the root of his problems was his father's suicide; his real nemesis was his chronic sense of responsibility toward his mother. She constantly manipulated his feelings, especially his sense of guilt, and her smothering, contradictory outpourings kept him in a state of morbid ambivalence by blessing or browbeating him with a love to which he felt unequal. There is some indication that Martha Berryman had problems with alcohol and men herself which Haffenden indicates via a Berryman journal entry but does not discuss. Nor does he discuss John's relationship with his step-father who was his father figure from his twelfth to his twenty-fourth year. However, it seems pretty clear that his relationship with his mother formed the psychological core of his crippling insomnia, acute anxiety and rage.

Haffenden argues that Berryman was driven by a desperate need to prove himself *and* to punish himself at the same time. As a young man this spectre was obscured by his brilliance and wittiness. By the end of the forties, however, wrecked by an extra-marital affair in the summer of 1947, he had assumed a second—or in the long run, his real—nature. His social role became that of a braggart, womanizer, unpredictable drinker and aggressive intellectual. He sustained himself by a program of greater and greater self-demands and probably put way too much energy in his teaching, expending vast amounts of nervous energy apparently to overwhelm as well as to seriously instruct his frightened and dazzled students. Convinced that acute anxiety and unhappiness fed his creativity, he appears to have cultivated agony with the same tenacity that a medieval mystic sought union with God. By the late 60s, he was a cyclothymic mess.

Berryman won the Pulitzer Prize in 1965 for *77 Dream Songs*, and the National Book Award in 1969 for *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*, and in general received a great deal

of attention in his last decade. "He belongs," Haffenden writes, " to what has become known as the Middle Generation of American poets, a group that includes Delmore Schwartz, Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, and Theodore Roethke." While "confessional" is a fuzzy identifying term for these poets, most of their writing is characterized by personal trauma felt as *the* centripetal force that whirls all other considerations of myth, learning, and daily observation, into its vortex. Refusing la vie bohème, expatriotship, and any engagement by non-English European literary movements—Berryman it seems might have improved his lot immensely by becoming a Dadaist—these poets stayed home, looked up to Yeats, Auden and Frost, and established the image of the American poet as a teacher sharing an office with his academic colleagues, a very tactile member of a middle-class professional community. Because of the congruity of these poets to the teaching profession itself, and because their writing for the most part does not provide any challenging difficulties, it is natural that they have been taught a great deal and identified by teacher-critics as *the* poets of their generation.

However, if this "Middle Generation" is considered in a context that includes George Oppen, Kenneth Patchen, Kenneth Rexroth, Louis Zukofsky and Charles Olson, all poets whose important work was done at the same time as the "Middle Generation" poets, then the poetry of Berryman, for example, looks a good deal different. Set next to Schwartz and Jarrell, he looks fairly inventive; next to Zukofsky and Olson, he comes off as an egomaniacal windbag with nothing original to say. In the long run, his poetry is engaging only if we are willing to find his life compelling. In his mature work I do not believe that there is a worked out poetics or a truly invented mythology of the self.

I gather that there are those who do find John Berryman's life compelling. I don't. Undermining his ability at any one point to throw his whole being into his poetry was a buffoonish web of compulsive personal habits that were probably cute or maddening depending from what angle, and hour, they came at you. Not only did he read poetry to women's feet and miaow at them over the telephone, he defecated in university corridors and urinated in hotel beds. As a young man, he slapped himself, beat himself and hid in his mother's closet, snarling. As an older man, he roared and barked at his doctors. In an awful way, Haffenden's "life" makes one realize that Berryman's last decade resembled the last few years in Elvis Presley's life. In the late 60s, his old teacher and friend Mark Van Doren wrote to William Meredith: "Your letter says very wisely what I have been trying to say to John on the phone—with no results except long silence and then screams."

—Clayton Eshleman

Elizabeth Bishop: The Complete Poems. 1927-1979
Farrar Straus Giroux. 1983.

This book contains all the poems of Elizabeth Bishop, 108 to be exact, written over a period of 57 years. In addition, there are 26 translations from the Portuguese, French and Spanish. While she undoubtedly did not simply write two poems a year, the small production over a long lifetime of writing raises a number of questions that probably only a critical biography can answer. Did she write many other poems that she did not consider good enough for publication? Are there thousands of pages of worksheets for the 108? Or did she simply not write much?

Based on the evidence of this book, I would guess that only the latter question can be answered affirmatively, for the personality of the work argues an upper-middle-class life of travel and leisure time in which scenes and events would occasionally crystalize into deft metaphorical observations. She must have also spent a good deal of time working out meters and rhyme, for the emphasis of all her writing is on the scrupulous, completed thing, cleansed, as it were, of all the *scoriae* of birth and development.

At her best she sounds like this:

> At low tide like this how sheer the water is.
> White, crumbling ribs of marl protrude and glare
> and the boats are dry, the pilings dry as matches.
> Absorbing, rather than being absorbed,
> the water in the bight doesn't wet anything,
> the color of the gas flame turned as low as possible.
> One can smell it turning to gas; if one were Baudelaire
> one could probably hear it turning to marimba music.
> The little ocher dredge at work off the end of the dock
> already plays the dry perfectly off-beat claves.
>
> from *The Bight*

At her worst, like this:

> In your next letter I wish you'd say
> where you are going and what you are doing;
> how are the plays, and after the plays
> what other pleasures you're pursuing:
>
> taking cabs in the middle of the night,

driving as if to save your soul
where the road goes round and round the park
and the meter glares like a moral owl . . .

from *Letter to N.Y.*

Most of the time, doggerel and exact observation blend into decorative patterns like this:

On the unbreathing sides of hills
they play, a specklike girl and boy,
alone, but near a specklike house.
The sun's suspended eye
blinks casually, and then they wade
gigantic waves of light and shade.
A dancing yellow spot, a pup,
attends them. Clouds are piling up . . .

from *Squatter's Children*

The rhyme sing-songs the writing back to a childlike mood in which the actualities of Brazilian "squatter's children" disappear i.e., Bishop's children are out of the *National Geographic,* not of the world of the film *Pixote*. Such a stanza, while very well written, reflects the absence of the "other," in any credible personal, historical or political sense, that pervades nearly all of her poetry. I stress the word "credible," for black and Indian maids, children, and gardeners, *are* the subjects of poems upon which her reputation—which is considerable—is based. But the writing itself—tidy, punctilious, and always clever—presents these people as the mischievous, exotic diminutions of the colonial mind. Occasionally, a grim truth leaks between her lines. I ask the reader to reflect on the following from "Manuelzinho," her portrait of an Indian gardener:

Or, briskly, you come to settle
what we call our "accounts,"
with two old copybooks,
one with flowers on the cover,
the other with a camel.
Immediate confusion.
You've left out the decimal points.
Your columns stagger,
honeycombed with zeros.
You whisper conspiratorially;
the numbers mount to millions.
Account books? They are Dream Books.
In the kitchen we dream together

how the meek shall inherit the earth—
or several acres of mine.

The fact is that the numbers *would* amount to millions if Manuelzinho and the thousands of other Indian gardeners were to be paid fair back wages by their "masters." Once that is recognized, the last four lines fill with savage irony, but not one Bishop herself is presenting—as Blake did in "The Little Black Boy"—as a compassionate understanding.

This sort of mentality permeates Bishop's writing whether she is in Brazil, Nova Scotia or New York City, and it is a sad and vexing limitation, for she is capable of observing the natural world precisely *and* imaginatively. In the same gardener poem, she can write:

Between us float a few
big, soft, pale-blue,
sluggish fireflies,
the jellyfish of the air...

While a kind of Argus-eyed observation is always present, occasionally Bishop attempts to stretch the poem into a more demanding context, to engage a personality that she considers her equal. One example is her "transformation" of Pablo Neruda's "Alberto Rojas Jimenez Viene Volando" into "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore" (which, given her influence on Robert Lowell, may be the stimulation for the latter's *Imitations*). In Bishop's hands, however, Neruda's powerful elegy, filled with canceled eyes, raining marrow and guitar-players dressed in bees (which visually evokes the world of Marc Chagall), becomes an Edward Gorey-like fantasia, of Moore in a holding pattern over Manhattan, "with heaven knows how many angels all riding / on the broad black brim of your hat." This is a masterful example of the "academic" poem, in which an earlier more powerful work is diluted and reified.

Another more ambitious example to confront a peer is the much anthologized "Visits to St. Elizabeth's" apparently based on visits Bishop made to Ezra Pound, incarcerated as a lunatic there. I say "apparently," as neither Pound's name, nor any details or reflections based on being with him, appear in the poem. Each stanza increasingly fills with descriptions of an insane sailor wearing a watch, and a "Jew in a newspaper hat" dancing and weeping about the ward. Pound appears in the penultimate line of each stanza as a "man," qualified by adjectives that initially present him as "tragic," "talkative," and "honored," (does she mean this ironically?) but shift into an increasingly negative cast of "cranky," "cruel," "tedious" and finally "wretched" as the poem progresses. I think that those who have anthologized and honored this poem have done so out of a sincere belief that it is a compassionate portrayal of that very convoluted man. To my reading, it is a vaguely camouflaged, mean attack on Pound that refuses to argue any of its adjectival assertions. In the last line of each stanza, Bishop repeats that this "man... lies in the

house of Bedlam." Since a verdict of insanity probably saved Pound from a death penalty for treason, the word "lie," much more than repose, strongly implies that Pound did not tell the truth about his condition. Well, this may be so. My point is that in the poem's context, Bishop appears to conclude that Pound can be identified in some ultimate way as a wretched liar.

All in all, this is the kind of poetry that has, over the years, determined the standards for publication in *The New Yorker*, and that is currently the spirit presiding over the child of *The New Yorker,* the *American Poetry Review.* It is in Robert Kelly's words, "a verse that aspires to decorate the reader's consciousness in much the same way that the furniture displayed in *The New Yorker* would decorate the reader's home." It has enormous appeal to those who prefer to dismiss Pound as a perverse pedant and still believe that the poem is a well-"behaved" clavicord, an object in a spotless salon, in which detailed knowledge of a subject is honored as long as the subject poses for the poem and is presented *correctly*. Elizabeth Bishop's poetry is a sinister and thorough lesson in Apollonian poetics: a view from the tower, clear thought, rational justification.

—*Clayton Eshleman*

SQUATTER'S CHILDREN

Elizabeth Bishop's poem, "Squatter's Children," is a clue to what went wrong with the entire epoch of art just ended. Eshleman, like the postaesthetic philosophers Arthur Danto and Richard Kuhns, wants to kick over an aesthetic which tries to stand on one leg: "psychic distance," the "aesthetic attitude," the distance from which we get a "detached view of the object, see its shapes and colors," as Danto writes in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace.*

Richard Kuhns has asked if we should see a drowning man as a water ballet instead of someone to be rescued, and Danto says it would be "wrong or inhuman to take an aesthetic attitude, to put at psychical distance certain realities—to see a riot, for instance, in which police are clubbing demonstrators, as a kind of ballet, or to see the bombs exploding like mystical chrysanthemums from the plane they have been dropped from. The question instead must arise as to what one should do."

In general, Danto and Kuhns say it's wrong to try to enjoy anything which involves an unconsenting human feeling pain. If merely saying that runs head-on against an aesthetic, something's very wrong.

Yet when Eshleman said little more, the Los Angeles Times *Book Review* was filled with protest letters. "Moral stances have nothing to do with poetry," Virginia Brasier wrote,

and Tom Clark complained that Eshleman was "clearly incapable of taking Bishop's poetry on its own terms. . . But whose fault is that, her book's or his?"

What terms can these be, that a reviewer who reported himself unable to curb his pity and make some children a source of aesthetic delight, should fly in the face of them?

I suspect I have more sympathy for the terms than Mr. Eshleman. Bishop's poetry belongs to the broad current M.H. Abrams calls "Natural Supernaturalism," and Tony Tanner, writing more specifically of American art, "The Reign of Wonder." At her best, Bishop gives us those "moments," "spots of time," that Wordsworth hoped for, when our minds, "fitted to the world" find "Paradise" in the "simple produce of the common day." "Modernity," Kuhns writes in *Structures of Experience,* has been "defined as a shift in the purposes of art from moral to aesthetic values," the attempt, Coleridge said, to wipe away the film of habit and custom which had "bedimmed all the luster" of life. "Now I wash the gum from your eyes," Whitman chants, "You must habit yourself to the dapple of light and of every moment of your life." Even a "collar button," a "cigarette butt," Kandinsky writes, "sings": Leger leaps over a physical barrier separating an art show from a trade fair to exult in the propellers as "higher art." Praising her disciple Lowell's *Life Studies,* Bishop wrote:

> They all also have that sure feeling, as if . . everything, and anything suddenly seemed material for poetry. . . . It seems to me it's the whole point of art, to the artist (not the audience)—life is all right, for the time being.

"Squatter's Children" shows us the limits of this aesthetic: if, to rise to aesthetic appreciation of the subject before us, we have to overcome in ourselves not the dead hand of custom, but our lively human sympathy, this current's end has been frustrated. From its start, this current was the foe, specifically, of custom's deadening us, of the way custom made unenjoyable certain everyday scenes; it was never the foe of the way human pity made unenjoyable the sight of human pain. Overcoming human pity is quite another enterprise from overcoming custom.

Yet, in the general war to free the eye from custom, it is no wonder that sometimes the eye was freed from the heart; and goodhearted people like Elizabeth Bishop learned to see unhappiness as colors.

The poem Bishop calmly titled "Squatter's Children" shows her responses deadened. (In that poem. This isn't a general discussion of Bishop.) "Squatter's Children" wouldn't interest me if I thought her a bad person. It is the poem of a good person whose constant pursuit of aesthetic distance has, at an important moment, dulled her human response. It can happen to an artist as easily as to those news cameramen in Atlanta who calmly videotaped a man trying to burn himself to death last March, instead of intervening: "I caught myself, my eyes fixed on her tragic forehead," Monet told

his friend and biographer, Clemenceau, "in the act of mechanically analysing the succession of appropriate color gradations which death was imposing on her immobile face." He was sitting at his wife's deathbed. "My reflexes caught me up in spite of myself, in an unconscious operation which was the daily course of my life—just like an animal turning his mill."

This has nothing to do with Bishop's politics. What if, indeed, she believed intervention futile, or inappropriate. Some goodhearted conservatives, like the (much maligned) George Will, might react that way. But Will could not look at those children without feeling pity. He would never dream of turning them into a poem to charm a *New Yorker* reader's idle afternoon. Wallace Stevens sees that man living on the dump and hates him. But even Stevens (much farther to the right, I suspect, than Bishop) is not so indifferent to the man's plight that he can turn the man into colors to contemplate. Updike sometimes unnerves me that way. And I admire Updike greatly. The aesthetic experience's value has been under growing fire for fifteen years, in every art. "Postmodern" usually means "Postaesthetic": rejection of an art built on, justified by, a single value, the aesthetic experience; deriding all the rest as "content." The postaesthetic aestheticians never bother to dispute that blood is a lovely red. They claim that man can't be split into parts which act one at a time. There is no Economic Man who is pure profit and loss, no Aesthetic Man who is only gratified sight. The 19th century economists and aestheticians alike began by creating such simplifications for convenience, and ended by confusing them with realities. Their Economic Man was a "covetous machine," their Aesthetic Man was a machine for seeing. This has nothing to do with how human beings actually do economics or aesthetics, since the full person encounters each experience. When we're told the statue of Santa Fina we're admiring is the saint's mummy, waxed, the lines and colors don't change but our full experience changes so much the mere aesthetic is overwhelmed. Are we wrong?

Or was the old aesthetic too limited? When we watch a master like Bishop, habituated, as Monet describes, to regarding objects from an aesthetic distance, write a poem encouraging us to distance ourselves from human suffering and contemplate it as a source of pleasure, we even wonder if the old single-value aesthetic was intrinsically wrong.

—George J. Leonard

Note: The following letter was sent to the *American Poetry Review* and rejected because, in editor Arthur Vogelsang's words, "it allowed Lowell and Berryman to be beat over the head rather than discussed or evaluated."

Dear Editors:

I enjoyed Marjorie Perloff's "column" on Lowell and Berryman in the May–June APR, and it made me think about some things I'd like to comment on:

I wonder about the "unendurable sufferings" (top of second column, p. 32), especially in the light, or the darkness I should say, of the European backdrop, for such a strong term might identify concentration camp victims. One of the sores that her essay opens up is to what extent the so-called "suffering" of Berryman and Lowell was self-induced short-circuitings, a conscious making of oneself sick, or crazy (in contrast to insane) out of a need to fuel the poem, or aura the life, as if they had nothing, or not enough, to go on relative to other experiences and sources, so that being nutty, cruel, and living life as a psychological binge, provided form and content as well as identity. I think it is crucial to make a distinction between the madness and writing of Artaud, say, and the madness and writing of Lowell; writing-wise it is the difference between "Skunk Hour" and "Artaud le mômo"; in the former all we learn of Lowell's predicament is that his mind's not right—whatever that means (it seems to mean that his madness is demonstrated by wanting to watch young people fuck in parked cars); in the latter, Artaud at least attempts to get at the core of his, and man's, terror and works with the demons (suppôts) who were apparently created in what he calls "the Bardo of electro-shock." There is something stingy and trivial in the way Lowell engages whatever is eating at him—he seems to have no context for it outside of describing literal circumstances—and in that way he remains a Protestant and, I feel, is not really penetrated by the source materials ("history, philosophy, religion, anthropology") that Perloff says he and Berryman "devoured." I think she is closer to the truth when she notes how disconnected RL and JB were to "the great art movements" of their times. Not only did RL not go visit Jasper Johns, say, but the devouring of whatever was read, or viewed, did not seem to take hold as an "otherness," or assert itself as material, in his writing. Again the contrast with Artaud is striking: for all of his self-possession, Artaud actually made the quite difficult *journey* (not trip) to the Tarahumara Indians of Mexico and not only wrote ethnographically valid prose about what he saw there, but used the experience to amplify and resonate his own condition.

What I am trying to get at is that the other edge of the Protestant blade that played havoc with the souls of RL and JB is a kind of psychological Narcissism—and not the Greek myth in which the figure loses himself in his image—but a form in which the image is refused and the figure insists upon himself, not as image, but as the literal truth of his suffering.

Such blades seem to lock together in the following way: the man never really goes mad, nor does madness really enter his writing. He drives himself to the brink via booze and insomnia, i.e., misbehaves, breaks his wife's nose etc., is institutionalized

briefly, dries out, and is welcomed back. Since such a cycle is neither visionary nor really damned, neither is the writing. Lowell, for example (for the cycle itself is not simply Lowell's), is more interested in describing, rather briefly, the inmates in his asylum than in concentrating on why he is there. If something cannot be described it will not be addressed—or a metaphor will be used to titillate and at the same time screen off a psychic condition: "Each one of us holds a locked razor." An unwary reader will find himself empathizing with Lowell's condition without being told anything about it.

Another matter that came up while reading Perloff's essay is the extent to which a poet like Jerome Rothenberg is scorned or dismissed because on almost every point he represents an alternative position/interest/or background element to RL or JB. Rothenberg is a Jew, is not an Ivy Leaguer, is not a Wild Man or drunk, has marginal university affiliations, is deeply involved with other contemporary art forms, is not an Anglophile but is connected to 20th-century European avant-garde movements and speculations, and perhaps quite importantly, as a translator/reader, has an ongoing commitment to Third- and Fourth-World poetries and ethnographical materials. There is a "darkening" in Rothenberg that sets against the "whiteness" of a Lowell. If one counters that Lowell did translate Rimbaud etc., it is easy to point out that he also dropped 10 of the 25 quatrains of "Le bâteau ivre," which strongly implies that nearly half of one of the most famous European poems of all time is not worth translating. My point is that there is an uncontested whiteness in every pavilion of Lowell's "image," and I would argue too that his literalistic descriptive confessionalism is in part an obeisance to aspects of North America that are at odds with many of the priorities in the poetry and poetics of Rothenberg, so that an "elect" and "heretical" configuration is constantly at large. Rothenberg's concern with "wilderness" situates his cry in a wilderness, outside the citadel Spicer aptly named as "The Spirit of the English Department."

I wonder to what extent the books Perloff names at the end of her essay by RL and JB do mark "the end of an era." I was amused by the openings of a couple of poems in the same issue of APR as her essay appears in. David Groff's "The Tomb of Lysias" begins:

> I have passed my twenty-third summer
> in the Beirut Library, roofless now
> after the trouble with the Christians.

He leaves the library, however, in line 12, slipping out with "that beautiful woman, Rosina, who works near my desk and seems herself a source of sunlight." A few pages later, a poem, "Sotto Voce," by Andrew Hudgins, begins:

I'm standing in the university
library, staring at the German books
and I don't parle eine word of Allemand.
Actually I'm listening to a girl named Beth
call her boyfriend in El Paso.

The library as a place to meet girls seems to me quite in line with the Lowell/Berryman syndrome of the "personal" or "relation" used to cover up the absence of reading and writing as a personal, antiphonal exchange. In fact, a kind of simplistic, sophomoric writing about the authors' literal, daily lives infests APR, almost as an unstoppable afterbirth of the RL/JB "generation." Peter Serchuk's "For Poppa, Asleep in the Smithtown Madhouse," same issue, opens:

When they knew you were sick
you drove yourself nuts. Chasing nurses
for crazy laughs, chewing through ashtrays
just to prove you were insane.
Hardening of the arteries, they said.
You squealed your approval
tugging at your open fly.

It is as if the editors of APR have surrounded Perloff's essay with a chorus of snickering, Lowell/Berryman/Sexton "imitations." I am amused by them at the same time I am disgusted, and fear their strength in numbers, i.e., the massive sameness of the same blandness, like the paint drooling down over the globe in the old Atlas Paint signs. Serchuk might as well be writing about eating a hamburger as well as someone feigning madness, for the language is *unaffected by the nature of its material.* As if the so-called madness passes in one ear and out the other, as reading and other source materials, relative to the writing, pass in one ear and out the other. As if the resistance to any kind of otherness has become so total that it has become completely porous. That is, not porous in the sense that one can be entered/affected by what is out there and, as whatever it is comes in, transform it into receptive imaginal strategies, but porousness as the front and back doors loose on the hinges banging in the wind, no one home, so that what blows in blows out with so little transformation at work that the poem becomes congruent with the most conventional comments and opinions. No wonder APR is popular, for a moron could read and "enjoy" most of the poetry it prints. In fact the context established by the magazine is so slack that few of its "readers" will feel any tension, let alone argument, between the implications of Perloff's essay and the poetry that encircles it! And it is not only the poetry: Alan Dugan in his interview sounds like a man mumbling in his sleep.

—*Clayton Eshleman*

TUUMBA #31-#41:
Ted Greenwald, *Smile*; Steve Benson, *The Busses*; Alan Bernheimer, *State Lounge*; David Bromige, *P-E-A-C-E*; John Mason, *Fade to Prompt*; Stephen Rodefer, *Plane Debris*; P. Inman, *Ocker*; Barrett Watten, *Complete Thought*; Carla Harryman, *Property*; Clark Collidge, *Research*; Kit Robinson, *Riddle Road*.

During the past six years Tuumba Press has published over forty chapbooks, most of them by poets whose lives belong wholly to the post-World-War-II era (so the first major event of their adult lives was Viet Nam). "It seems that 'the war babies,'" Robert Smithson writes, "those born after 1937-38 were 'Born Dead'—to use a motto favored by the Hell's Angels. The philosophism of reality ended some time after the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the ovens cooled down. Cinematic 'appearance' took over completely sometime in the late 50's." The embarassment of being human is real and relentless. The movie lacks verisimilitude. We have a poor actor for President. The world is an artifact, a machine and fuel for a machine. What can art production mean when *all* production is superfluous? There is too much stuff. Not just too much poetry—though clearly there is too much of that—but too much everything. Everywhere people are pressing things on you: Big Macs, backscratchers, books of poems. Fat and shelving are problems. It's not a question of good and bad stuff. In a culture where PRODUCTION is the value, adding to the Gross National Product (of cars, poems) becomes another form of collaboration with the enemy.

This is a strong argument. I am not sure how true it is.

It is too big a question to answer here, but perhaps I can make an initial distinction or two in the direction of an answer.

There is an order of poetry which aspires to the perfectly decorated Christmas tree, and there is a poetry which aspires to something more. The former is heavily subsidized by the tastemaking institutions. The eleven chapbooks here under notice (there can be no "review" in the allotted space) belong to the latter order.

One of my old friends, the painter Tom Moore, says of a certain kind of art galiery,

"You can get nice horse pictures there." It is not clear to many people perhaps that a Frank Stella painting represents a higher art—an art of a different order—than a representation of a reared stallion pawing the air with transcendent energy, but Tom has the authority of the entire art establishment with him. It finally comes down to price, of course: people will give hundreds of dollars for a nice horse picture (hundreds of them will), but a few people will give tens of thousands of dollars for a Frank Stella. Therefore it is Stella who is hung in the prestigious museums, who is discussed in art history courses, who—even—becomes the subject of an article in *Time*. It is not a question of Stella being the best (whatever that would mean), but it is important that whoever is invested with the office of the best this season be an artist who can be taken seriously. That is a minimum sign of health in the institutions of an art.

Although it is perfectly anyone's right who wants a nice horse picture to have one, it will soon be the death of painting if no one can distinguish between sentimentality (or interior decoration) and visual knowledge. Increasingly, the comparable distinction is failing to be made in poetry: universities, foundations, and the publishers of poetry support poets who write nice horse poems.

It is in this context that Lyn Hejinian's work with Tuumba Press should be seen. If I understand correctly, she edits, designs, prints, and distributes these books, at least in large measure, by herself. She alone manages to bring us more "nutrition of impulse," to use Pound's phrase, than the National Poetry Series and the university presses combined.

The forms of arts and sciences which developed in the nineteenth century proposed several subjective and objective loci: the subjectivity of the heart, the mind, the unconscious, the emotions, the psyche—as the object of psychology's study; the objectivity of nature, society, economy, culture. But nowhere were there *radical* subjects and objects—that is, beyond all possible explanation but knowable as a stream of freshness or renewal. There was neither intimacy nor otherness which was absolute.

Corporate society pitted a false psychology against a false nature, thereby creating a dialectic which never touched the grounds of radical contradiction. Corporate technology is description and reproduction of the existent world; it clones a second little world from the first, and the advantages of the replica are that it is packageable (i.e. marketable) and manipulable. In short, at some point in this century, event was replaced by product.

As is often the case with things which disappear from life, event reemerged as art. In *A Long Gay Book*, Gertrude Stein set out to write "a description of anyone and everything there was to be known about anyone." Telling what is known, however, never gets to tell what is most exciting about life, which is how the unknown manifests itself not out of the known but the unknown. So, she says, "it was necessary to let come what would happen to come because after all knowledge is what you know but what is happening is inevitably what is happening to come."

Consider this passage from Clark Coolidge's *Research*:

> I am baffled at my own lack of impedance
> But I take no stories of the chair
> The man who holds rhyme holds the air
> The river filled with bird life after fish
> How could there be no noise in poetry?
> So to be, but what kind?
> So I must practice coldhearted
> All the time the sorts were on the wall
> The lapping of the tongue between stanzas
> The loaves and the light

What is happening to come happens without this or that moment of the languaging process being allowed to exaggerate itself or to compromise the *event*. Coolidge has important concerns with abstract expressionism and bebop; the parallels should be noted here. It is not pro/duction; it is not forward (*pro*) leading (*ducere*); it is not prose (*prosus*, straightforward); it is verse (*versus*, a turning of the plow). The line is not the producer (as of a movie) of coming attractions. It does not abandon its immediate duration in favor of some theoretical future event, which projects the known into the known. Against boosters, producers, consumers, and forward-looking people, it claims the right of one Born Dead: I am *here*, I am *right* here, time stays with *me*. Though Coolidge sometimes writes in forms which look like prose, they are verse, always.

Jackson Pollock painted much of the time with cheap house paints and hardware store enamels. When asked if he was worried about the impermanence of the medium, he said he was like a Navajo sand painter.

Tuumba has become increasingly associated with a tendency in contemporary poetry which was first identified by a small anthology, edited by Ron Silliman, in *Alchuringa* in 1975. It has published chapbooks by nine of the sixteen poets Silliman identified with terms such as "language centered," "minimal," "non-referential formalism," "diminished referentiality," "structuralist." Clark Coolidge has been a major source for many of these writers, though I suspect in some cases they have managed to further their own work by skillfully mis-reading him. This is, of course, the most positive form of literary use.

It's probably fortunate that no satisfactory name for this tendency appeared. The atmosphere has been so slack that a catchy group name might have provided sufficient cornerstone for a church. The range of names, however—non-referential, minimal, etc.—indicate that *something* is missing. I find also "counter-communicative" and, in a recent symposium in *American Book Review*, "nonsyntactical." The three major fields of linguistic relationship—language to a referent, to other parts of itself, and to an

audience—are all called into question. The rhetoric at times has led me to feel that I was attending a convention of ascetics, everyone laying claim to more profound renunciations than the previous speaker.

Intelligence, however, at least in one of its modes, tends toward asceticism, and it seems to me that intelligence of the more ascetic sort is the prime quality of the Tuumba poets.

The major on-going concerns of the West, to the extent that it is possible to disengage the mind from the riveting gaze of the false face which looks at us from every TV and supermarket, poise between two modes or moments of intelligence which might be called "critical" and "speculative." Critical intelligence—and I am using the term in the spirit of Kant's critiques, not the current pale activity of English Departments—insists upon justifying its means before it uses them. The promise of critical thought, that it will deliver us by its rigor to certainty, tends to choke on itself and never get beyond the methodological debate. Paradoxically, therefore, it is liable to solipsism, subjectivism, authoritarianism, and sterile purity. Speculative intelligence, on the other hand, is willing and eager to follow out relationships even when they are tenuous. It is open, "mystical," anarchistic, and too often fatuously innocent. The most significant forms of the modern West are the bastard off-spring of speculation and criticism: tragicomedy (Shakespeare), parody (Cervantes), and anatomy (Melville). The excitement in such a culture derives from the inevitable play with self-cancellation.

In Barrett Watten's *Complete Thought,* the authority of critical intelligence is commanding. Even though the convention of presentation looks like verse, the language does not turn upon itself, as it does in Coolidge's work. Watten is, as his title declares, interested in sentences and their characteristic linear movement. Sentences, however, are pitted against one another and against themselves, to create stasis and to frustrate production:

> What is a word! The middle voice focuses on the (disastrous) middle distance.
>
> "My body is the car I drive." The *vehicle* inside *you* contains a *person*.
>
> Each population is transplanted, bearing witness to common survivals in speech (on Sundays).
>
> Every testimony pours out all at once, in spite of appearance.

Watten invokes an aesthetic of the order Keats appeals to in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," but here the urn never sweeps the paradox away by speaking for itself.

Carla Harryman dedicates *Property* to Barrett Watten, and there are superficial resemblances in their work. The unit of composition in Watten's work, however, is atomic: the sentences pile up and assert their inexplicable and arbitrary completion. Harryman's forms are composed in larger units, and, although the writing *tends toward* hermetic

closure, it has a strong parodic impulse: "Ducks fly across teasing the edges of clouds with their wings. Reason tells us not to make anything out of these events. Birds fall into the sea. The sea swells, pushing the land under. A seeming eternity, by force. So all that's left is a narrative concealing an error. Contentment is sediment below this image. Passivity has been accomplished through the descriptive process, a mechanism which devours objects, subjecting them to the decay of inner life." This writing subverts itself in rigorous and sometimes frightening ways.

David Bromige's *P-E-A-C-E* and Ted Greenwald's *Smile* are also prose works with strong parodic content. Greenwald's parable lives up to its title: I smiled. Bromige evokes a heartier kind of merriment. The combination of zaniness and intelligence is rare and beautiful.

There is a certain quality which can be heard as verse that is independent of sense, image, reference. It is linguistic charge, "excitement," as they say of atoms bombarded with photons. Charged language *feels good* in the mouth: it awakens the speech-making organs and, by proprioceptive overflow, the mind. This, for example, for Kit Robinson's "In the Orpheum Building":

> "Now I have to re-check his work." What's in
> Back to bowling flower bunches in the slides
> Has hands and bells out over a body of water
> Maybe's both ways, be simpler catching a bucket.

And this from P. Inman's *Ocker*:

> (marmappled)...
> ...(orbit seckle
> tharping foam out of Dred Peems
> on zoids.

The poetic values here are not distantly related to W.C. Williams' early work: the orbit seckle replaces the chicory flower but the song is American speech.

John Mason is—I believe—the youngest poet represented here, and the twenty-some short pieces in *Fade to Prompt* are so diverse as to make generalization difficult. This little poem, however, will give a sense of the attractive quality of the work:

> I am cold, funloving, under a grey face.
> My dog can read.

I cannot quote from Alan Bernheimer's *State Lounge* at sufficient length to demonstrate its interest. The title poem, however, which comprises more than half of the volume, juxtaposes short italicized lines from a travel poem, recording a journey from West to East (including an obligatory mention of Winnemucca) with lines from an anatomy of static facts and images. The interplay between these language spaces develops a peculiar and interesting tension. Its evidence bears directly on the question of the rela-

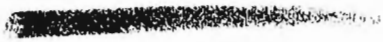
tionship of prose and verse.

Steve Benson's poems in *The Busses* are likewise impossible to quote satisfactorily. His form divides the page into as many as three simultaneous columns, which at points melt into one another, creating for the reader giddy little moments of uncertainty. It offers a useful take on the fact that the mind moves along more tracks than linear language can possibly record.

Stephen Rodefer's *Plane Debris* is an extraordinary poem. In its twenty-three, fifteen line stanzas, Rodefer is party to more linguistic events than some poets manage in entire careers. I will let this short passage stand for my review of many pages:

> A shale, pale English shore, more sure than France. I expose myself to language. It makes a goal. I am open mouthed. It arrests me. The crowd roars. They long to eat English.

—*Don Byrd*



The Invention of Solitude.
PAUL AUSTER.
Sun. 1982

The title of Paul Auster's slim collection of literary essays from the Seventies can be read as a cipher to decode the meanings of *The Invention of Solitude: The Art of Hunger*. To be more specific: *The Invention of Solitude* is a prose epic of the pangs of *father-hunger*.

The passionate quest for father, or father-image, runs deeply and widely through our literature. Melville could represent a starting point. And in the present: Olson (in *Maximus* indirectly, *The Post Office* blatantly), Fielding Dawson (mistaken guises of the father in *The Black Mountain Book* and *An Emotional Memoir of Franz Kline*). The poetry of Hugh Seidman and Lee Hickman addresses the father-force, the father-void, the various faces of the father archetype.

Auster begins his narrative with the experience of the father-void, the father as absolute other who needs, after the fact of his literal demise, an imaginative resurrection through language:

> Even before his death he had been absent, and long ago the people closest to him had learned to accept this absence, to treat it as the fundamental quality of his being. Now that he was gone, it would not be

difficult for the world to absorb the fact that he was gone forever.

But the son *does* find acceptance of his father's death difficult:

> If, while he was alive, I kept looking for him, kept trying to find the father who was not there, now that he is dead I still feel as though I must go on looking for him. Death has not changed anything. The only difference is that I have run out of time.

A tremendous turning in that final sentence: the father moves from death to life in artistic imagination while the son moves from life deathwards with art leading the way.

So Auster's imaginative recasting of who his father *might* have been finds its focus in his meditations upon some old family photographs. His tries to animate the still images of the father-stranger, attempts to flesh out the father-ghost with a possible life. And in so doing sparks a psychological process with flames fanning out to encompass his own identity as a man and father. He dedicates *The Invention of Solitude* to his own son. Hence the making of a book is itself a form of fathering, keeping the patriarchal energies forcefully animated.

While I adamantly argue that Auster's book be read as a straightforward account of recovering the unknown (unknowable?) father figure, I would also suggest that it should also be read as a philosophical reverie about using writing as a mode to deal with existential anguish, the absence of the significant other. It is a book about the necessity of writing a book when the pain of daily living suggests no other possible therapy.

In a narrow review of this book in *The New York Times* by W.S. Merwin, Merwin complains about Auster's literary affectations (shifts from first to third person, unexpected chapter demarcations) and attributes such literary ill manners to Auster's immersion in modern French letters. What is revealing in Merwin's criticism is his failure to comprehend how Auster's form is an outgrowth of Auster's longtime concern with the poetics of translation. What is being translated in *The Invention of Solitude* is a ghost-psychology, underworld *eidola* brought into the light of day consciousness and conscious language. To even attempt such a project with any care would necessitate a radical interrogation of the means of writing to accomplish such a task.

Two models for such a task come to mind: Edmond Jabès and Roland Barthes (who uses photographs of his mother as subject matter). Auster obviously feels inspiration from Jabès' example as revealed by his penetrating take on Jabès in *The Art of Hunger.* His evaluation of Barthes is unknown to me. Honor Auster, if you will, for following (not slavishly) the lead of both men in inventing a literary form for which we have no literary category. What is it that these three write? Intellectual memoir? Philosophical confessional? Autobiography as spiritual prose poem? All or none of the above?

One clarity emerges: this is a body of writing centrally engaged with the

philosophical issues surrounding the adequacy of written language to capture the flicking core of Being.

Auster's philosophical arguments are more transparently intimate than those of Jabès (whose father-hunger gets sublimated into a transcendentally textual Judaism) and Barthes (whose mother in her literality gets lost in the discussion of coding). That Auster is so emotionally unsparing with himself while playing the philosopher of the written word is very much to his credit. I plan to give this book to all kinds of people who couldn't care less about Derrida or the reaches of French Structuralism.

The cry for father, for the literal as well as archetypal father, is a deeply human need that little of our literature addresses without terrible sentimentality. Auster doesn't speak of himself in the third person in this narrative to be cutely avant-garde as the *Times* critic would bluster. He does so to maintain an optimal distance from his father's ghost. Language is that thin membrane that keeps dead parent from still living child.

Auster's language is exquisitely cadenced. He strikes me as the most singular prose stylist (as well as translator) of my generation. There's an "artless" surface to this account. A more probing examination reveals a finely polished prose that has been well-wrought. This prose is no more "casual" than that of Kafka's *Letter to His Father.*

While Kafka's book smacks of a terrible PLEADING, a fruitless polemic with a non-responding father, Auster's narrative suggests the tone of a merciless interrogation with a ghost. Not to hear any "answers"—rather to make contact simply with one's ghostly origins. Rumor has it that Shakespeare only played one role publicly: that of the ghost of Hamlet's father. A cycle in the male psyche needs to be completed. If I did not know my father in life, in death shall he be revealed, in my own journey deathward.

—*Norman Weinstein*

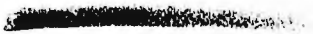
Vision.
DAVID MARR.
W. H. Freeman, 1982.

Perhaps the most far-reaching study of the neurobiological system of human perception is David Marr's *Vision.* Marr, who died a few years ago in his mid-thirties, was associated with MIT and this book – worth looking at if only for the profuse and remarkable illustrations – is his testament to how human vision can be understood. As he remarks in the book, flight would never have been understood only by studying – no matter how microscopically – the structure of a bird's wing; a theory of aerodynamics was necessary. Similary, vision will never be understood by studying rods and cones and sense-

data receivers; a theory of information processing is required.

Marr argues that three-dimensional object-centered adult vision is a "construction of descriptions"; that is, a model resulting from an extremely complex multi-level information processing system. The initial stages produce representations derived from groupings of retinocentric input. First, there is a 2-D "primal sketch" of image intensities and geometric organization. Next, transformed from the 2-D sketch, comes a "2½-D sketch" of the geometry of the visible surfaces within a viewer-centered frame. "The final step consists of transforming the viewer-centered surface description into a representation of the three-dimensional space and spatial arrangement of an object that does not depend upon the direction from which the object is viewed. This final description is object-centered rather than viewer centered." In Marr's analysis, the "main job" of sight is to tell about "shape and space and spatial arrangement, . . . to derive a representation of space" – even in certain cases (say, optical illusions) when "there is not direct visual evidence". Insofar as this is true, an object-centered bias appears to be built into adult visual processing systems that create, maintain, and *read* representations. Marr goes on to suggest that the 3-D model of sight, which is, after all, developed within a social context, may be usefully conceptualized as a *semantic* process. "The perception of an event or of an object must include the simultaneous computation of several different descriptions of it that capture diverse aspects of the use, purpose, or circumstance of the event or object."

—*Charles Bernstein*



Four Lectures.
STEPHEN RODEFER.
The Figures. 1982.

It is always a pleasure to see a writer grow, in Stephen Rodefer's case from Creeley imitations in *The Knife* (1965) and O'Hara appreciations in *The Bell Clerk's Tears Keep Flowing* (1978), right up to today's most dynamic rufflings of reality. He is an excellent embodiment of the current surge in language experiments. His are not as mechanistic and theory-bound as some, but neither is *Four Lectures* predictable backwater or academic watering-hole confessions of how it feels to be growing up or older.

The volume is a textbook of design. The neatly fashioned contents page suggests all: headings and page numbers arranged convexo-convex in bowed-out columns to make a circle. The poems are a cycle, the reading is circular, thus repeated endlessly. The fron-

tispiece photo of houses – Mondrian hives, heaped shoeboxes on a California hillside – are the geometries to come, the arbitrarily adopted fifteen-line blocks of writing. The carefully placed *"Pretext"* before the "lectures" proper, equalling the pun of its own designation with lines such as: "I may work in a factory but I slide to the music of the spheres. / My job is quality control in the language lab, explaining what went / Wrong in Northampton after the Great Awakening." It is the deadpan elegance, the simultaneities practiced by Rodefer that shimmer us along.

There are assembly-plant photos (DeLorean automobiles?) introducing each of the four sections, all labor-intensive; the rigorous fifteen-line stanzas themselves, very busy with reality; a "codex" for a coda; a carefully mocked index of capitalized words that occur randomly throughout the text (the magazine L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E entered as "G,L=A=N=," "G,L=A=N=G=U=A=," "U,L=A=N=G=," etc.). Finally, the semiserious back cover blurbs, with Creeley saying, "*Very* SOLID. GREAT and *useful* satiric ploy with bedrock concerns," and Jeremy Prynne reporting, "terrific, in the top Heliogabalus class. Sweat ran out of my ears and still does, a sheer delirium." Taken all together, the book is evidence of a heightened consciousness and great strategic powers.

Not least, is an important Preface, which reads as a bluff behind which serious intention is smuggled. Toned down from being a pronunciamento or playbill for a new art form, the author nevertheless calls the poetry that follows "painted poetry" (the same way and for the same reasons Frank O'Hara invented "Personism"). One finds the same teetering of tone as the poems, the artful balance between mordancy – teeth smiling as they bite – and knowing good cheer. "Today we have painted cities, painted conveyances, painted apartments, painted roads, painted people, even painted food. Is it not time for painted poetry as well?" Flawless! (Rodefer will go on to carefully remove any particular claim to uniqueness for the concept, pointing out it has been around since Blake and is "probably as ancient as the absence of machines.") The alternating seriousness, however, follows immediately in an accurate summarization of the poetry to come: "A poetry painted with every jarring color and juxtaposition, every simultaneous order and disorder, every deliberate working, every movement toward one thing deformed into another. Painted with every erosion and scraping away, every blurring, every showing through, every wiping out and every replacement, with every dismemberment of the figure and assault on creation, every menace and response, every transformation of the color and reforming of the parts, necessary to express the world." It is as serious and relevant an introduction as Robert Duncan's to *Bending the Bow.*

Accepting the implications of the title, the "lectures" are instructional, formal, and delivered with an audience in mind; not noodling. I like the stiffness of the title, because it is true we might learn something. What else is poetry for if it doesn't provide us with new ways of thinking? The lectures instruct us how to talk-think and how to have entertaining thoughts. There is a social issue to the poems, a comedy of manners:

You walk into a Soho gallery and you might see a pile of butter neatly
sculpted in the corner.
Three days later you go back and it has been spread around the gallery
with a scythe.
If it's not your house, it's your subway. Ghoul candies by Rodney Ripps.
Radon daughter. The woman checking out her hickey in the reflection
of Cartier's window.

Nothing is at rest in them. Not chaos but, as one of Rodefer's early teachers said, unselectedness is man's condition. There is a great sense of freedom. Images float equal in a dense-packed world. Anti-metaphoric speech or spoken thought with a little skew to the mind makes the surface of the writing opaque. The remarkable thing is not feeling exhausted after several pages. Private reference is shared equally with public fact or feat. One wants to laugh all the time, but it's the world around us. Only initially, superficially, does it seem like the association of ideas; instead, symbolism is subordinated to the logic of the sentence. That is, it is pure poetry, non-referential despite the proliferation of current references, non-descriptive but certainly not nondescript, less free association than random access memory. Rodefer's sequence takes us beyond the valley of the Freuds and into new territories of pattern and process. *Not* surrealism (or only a little bit, almost for history's sake):

O claquepatin, O mantra, O pie alamode, are you who they call Poochie?
Mayakovsky mistook the EAST RIVER for the Hudson and missed
meeting Lorca
in New York, the black dog trotting down the street holding an eraser
in its mouth

– and not a *Biotherm*. Other passages bear a logic and are apothegmatic almost despite themselves: "Economics is a description of the point at which a society finds itself / between birth and destruction."

The result is a relentless critique of social attitudes and literary determinism. Relentless? Despite the steady succession of discontinuous sentences, it doesn't feel that way; certainly not exhausting. Variety comes in sentence length, interrogatives, speech inflections, snaps of pun, and the ever-shifting topics, public and private, social and artistic. His frame of reference is as wide as any poet now writing. Every reader will find embedded pleasantires, whether "I am exactly as old as you ART" or the appearance of Pound's "waterbugs' mittens." Laconic wit, such as "I think I'll just call in tired today

and not make the scene at the tryouts / for a bird in flight," is followed by smart jabs against complacency. We expect no different from the great-great-grandson of Onward Rodefer.

But it is only one of the several purposes of *Four Lectures* to be cultural or social criticism, even if there's not much room to be anything else, today ("Our era promises to make the late Roman look small time, if not benign"). The book offers a systematic dialysis of meaning and a simultaneous study of the nature of language. In terms of poetics, Rodefer needles more than obeys conventional practices. He writes from *within* a condition of language, proving that language is malleable, hammered by interior energies, its tonality ringing in our ears. The sentence is his measure. He thinks in sentence lengths, not in images (not ideographically), not in syllables and lines (not projectively), not in stanzas as such, like traditional formalism, not the variable foot, the tone leading of vowels, the Hebraic-Melvillean bardic reath, that others have done so well with. He breaks the tyranny of the line. Meaning, not music, is his measure. Syncopation is in meaning not syntax. His lectures are sentence by sentence developments, in which each sentence is a completed narrative, not thought. "A grown man, he opened the can of Chicken Of The Sea and tucked a pinch / of TUNA in his cheek." "Information rafts through the air. An at bat. Soapy NUTS." Added together they equal more of the same, not a new sum; the ultimate paratactic frieze. The lesson seems to be that part of speech may be interchangeable, but the world is not.

Unlike Ashbery's discursiveness, Rodefer's statements are discretely assertive. "Deaf is lisp for death." "In love remove your antlers." "People in bed with thmselves do not really sleep with each other, / they're just Buddhists in love." Exemplary sentences; they appear, in their variety, like sample sentences in a grammar and usage drill book. They are engaged in what Charles Bernstein has called a "dialogue" with paradigmatic reality. It is an unpredictable flow of language, language as event rather than descriptive or a purported reality. It seeks to avoid describing and thereby depleting itself, so that even a single pun may be too conclusive. Thus, Rodefer displays endlessly. Language is multiplicity—plastic and plasmatic, omnidirecitonal, deviant and defiant. Anything might happen, and usually does.

The challenge is to sustain a level of inventiveness. "The trilobites pile into their cars. Others run until their toes leave / their bodies." Occasionally, some statements seem to ring truer or further than others: "I inhabit the language / the world heaps upon me." This might be seized upon as poetics. But it would be wrong to hunt those statements out and wave them. It's not that they gain by context or accumulation, or shrink in the light of isolation, but they really have no other nature, no other duty than how they are delivered in the series. The attractiveness is that if any one or several of the lines leave the reader dead or excluded, there will always be the next one to shower with reward. It's the abundance that I like, the plenitude—essentially an optimistic view of the world. No dry honing of masks of self, no boring into pulp, no verse so thin you can see through

it or when turned for a closer look vanishes altogether.

Predecessors? Hart Crane, surprisingly at first (and remember, if Crane had had sufficiently satiric mode of mind, he might have lived to have lunch with Frank O'Hara). Ashbery, most obviously, and perhaps most deniably. But more valuable is to read Rodefer in the context of his time and place and other writers published by The Figures, such as Rae Armantrout, Steve Benson, Clark Coolidge, Michael Davidson, Barbara Einzig, Lyn Hejinian, Bob Perelman, Tom Raworth, Kit Robinson, Ron Silliman, Geoff Young. And still others, such as Carla Harryman and Barry Watten.

One of the irreducibles of human nature and the reading public is the boredom factor. Too many otherwise gift-bering experimenters ignore it and consequently lose the gamble with our interest. What distinguishes Rodefer is the sustained quality of his wit. There can be no learning without laughing. Others are as clever, but it is his maintained virtuosity within the strictures of his forms that helps him succeed. I prefer the punch of his sentences to many of the amorphous organicisms of other contemporaries, who release themselves down a page. The fifteen-line stanzas are an excellent frame, roomy yet one which cuts short monotony. No vignettes are allowed to develop, no specific leitmotifs, but aslo no confessions, no falling to the knees. Instead, a certain discipline, a maintaining: "I wear CUFFLINKS because I am an ecology freak. I may be perverted, / but I'm not insatiable. You mean you like women with toothpicks too?" A high order of giddiness, redemptive and elegantly sportive. "A large flower in a woman's hair is a comparison," like so much else in these passages, is poetically true and linguistically provocative. "All this was but a comisado," Rodefer writes, approaching his conclusion, a surprise attach by night—an archaic word, freshened for use. He continues, "Put up your dukes," recognizing the challenge, then remindss us, "Love is not a gift, but an achievement"— meaning these poems as well.

All of this had been foretold by his Villon translation with its extraordinary footnotes, which fortunately is now back in print (Pick Pocket Editions, distributed by Small Press Distribution in Berkeley), and by his workings from the Greek Anthology published in abbreviated form as *Safety* (1977). As an example of the speed-up of human life and what effect it might have on its artists, here is a poet who has experienced three (or more) revolutions in poetic consciousness, who conversed as a young man with Robert Frost (at Amherst), studied under Olson and Creeley (at Buffalo), and now lives among the very lively young poets of the Bay Area. From horse to teleportation in one lifetime.

— *George F. Butterick*

For The Record: Three Rastafarian Poets

Dread Beat An' Blood.
LINTON KWESI JOHNSON.
Heartbeat Records. 1981.

Mi Cyaan Believe It.
MICHAEL SMITH.
LKJ Records. 1981.

Wat A Situashan.
OKU ONUORA.
Kuyu Records. 1980.

Rastafarianism is a wildly visionary religion with an obsessive belief in the potency of the word. The faith finds its scriptural basis in Biblical texts and in the public pronouncements of American Black Power prophet Marcus Garvey and Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia. The biblical material provides a vision of a chosen people's humbling odyssey toward reclaiming a sacred homeland. Garvey's words locate "Africa" as that home base for Blacks. And Selassie (whose original name was "Ras Tafari") gave Rastafarianism a real live political leader to elevate into a Moses leading his spiritual children back to their homeland.

Who are Ras Tafari's spiritual children? Third-World poor, exemplified by the residents of Jamaica's Trenchtown. Squarely in the teeth of their nearly unbearable squalor arrives a message of RELEASE. A hope for a massive immigration, from the urban ruins of the Caribbean to the glories of a Black-ruled Africa, is constantly rekindled among the true believers. The uplifting dream is as old as Colonialism itself.

And what a difficult dream to sustain—given Jamaica's history. So this eschatological vision is sustained by the regular use of marijuana among the faithful. The drug is seen as a *natural* gift from Adam's original garden in Eden. A manna to maintain a communal binding. Part and parcel of a ritual to shield the noble exile's hope from the encroachments of an oppressive social order.

A longing for an end to exile—a vision of self-determination in a preordained holy land—the herb as sacrament—these are the keys to Rastafarianism. And belief in the power of the word to alter The Social Lie.

Rastafarianism would have remained an obscure and esoteric cult if it had not been for the work of numerous reggae musicians and poets over the last decade and a half. Rasta-

farian stars like Bob Marley and Peter Tosh have, through their music, spread Rastafarianism far beyond Jamaica's borders.

But those popular musical performers don't engage me as deeply as the far more obscure Rastafarian poets who perform their work within the context of reggae musical settings. The three poets considered in this review are, simultaneously, serious poets as well as popular entertainers.

Linton Kwesi Johnson is a Jamaican who has resided in England for a number of years. His family and educational background are not unlike that of the American poet he most resembles in rhetoric and delivery: LeRoi Jones. On *Dread Beat An' Blood* he reads several poems (from the book of the same name) against a polished reggae setting of electric guitars and drums. His poems are read in a gruffly urgent monotone. His poems are *saturated* with scenes of ghetto violence. These lines from "Five Nights of Bleeding—For Leroy Harris" (Johnson often dedicates his poems to friends who are serving time as political prisoners) are representative:

> The rhythm jus' bubbling an' back-firing
> Raging and rising, then suddenly the music cut
> Steel blade drinking blood in darkness
> It's war among the rebels. . .

Johnson's language—British Jamaican patois—is full of surprising shifts. Within a single poem multiple selves meet and clash. The British intellectual meets the Rasta warrior. The poet encounters the jivey DJ. The complex levels of Johnson's poetic language are brought into play by his exceptionally lambent and flexible reading style. Not wholly speech, not wholly song. In that twilight realm where the word begins to take wings and lyrically ascend. Those American poets who have recorded with jazz or folk combos (Rexroth, Patchen, Meltzer) seem stiff and positively *square* next to Johnson. They lack his vocal heft and funk.

Michael Smith is a young Jamaican poet who continues to make the island his home. His poems reflect a pure Jamaican dialect. His poems are less surreal litanies of urban ghetto violence than dramatic settings for Rastafarian voices. His *Mi Cyaan Believe It* splices a spectrum of Jamaican voices together in a heavily ironic (yet sardonically amusing) fashion:

> Doris a moder a four
> get a wuk as a domestic
> boss man move in
> *an baps si sicai she pregnant again*. . .
> an mi caan believe it.

Smith's approach toward reading is polar to Johnson's. He stretches syllables, moans, yelps,

coos and bays to a sparse musical setting of an African drum beat. Very haunting.

Oku Onuora is a Jamaican contemporary of Michael Smith's who reads his politically engaged poetry with a musical lilt. His *Wat A Situashan* features a synthesizer sounding a simple riff over and over while Oku recites:

> Man! —What a situashan
> You think a just national—
> This yah one a international
> Me know dem plan.
> Stock piling nuclear weapons. . .

The effect is similar to that achieved by the American performance artist turned pop star, Laurie Anderson.

Books by these Rastafarian poets are even more difficult to obtain in the States than their records. And the records demand diligent search. The releases considered in this review were supplied by Sinbad Inc, a reggae music and literature supplier. Their free catalog can be obtained by writing Sinbad, POB 701, Athens, Ohio 45701.

— *Norman Weinstein*

My Life
LYN HEJINIAN
Burning Deck Press. 1980

Perhaps the amazing vitality of American poetry (the new American poetry) in the 20th century hs something to do with the fact that all of the innovative writers, from Poùnd through Williams, through Olson, O'Hara and Ginsberg, have refused to bow down to the European poetry of the past, though they have all struggled to create a legitimate new style which acknowledges rather than imitates the past. Williams' struggles to find a new measure, so well documented in Mariani's thorough biography, and recently presented in the notes of unpublished lecture materials which he edited for *Sulfur* (issue #4), testify to an exemplum of this search. When Williams painfully notes about Auden, so much more popular to poetry audiences than he was, that "Auden had 'won' because he had given these people something they were already accustomed to: new poems written in the old modes, the old accustomed excellences," (Mariani on Williams, *Sulfur, #4*, p. 6) he is also noting his own refusal to use European and classical materials rather than American ones.

This struggle continues in many serious writers today. It creates for me many confusions, both critical and poetic. One finds it easy to turn away from Eliot, in spite of his beautiful language, to Williams. But the matter of Pound and *his* constant turning away from American idiom, history, and myth while still in some way embodying more than anyone the defiant American spirit, is much more perplexing and difficult to sort out. Perhaps the matter is only somewhat clarified through Olson and *The Maximus Poems* which attempt something very similar to *The Cantos* but lean less heavily on Homer and turn the arena to American geography and the focus to American documents and politics.

One begins to see two struggles emerging, however. The first concerning content, the second, style or form. My own preferences in the matter take Creeley's dictum, "form is an extension of content," to resolve the matter, thus finding in *Paterson* the consummate resolution for a great poet of the search for a new measure through materials that are totally personal and thus American. Surely, part of the struggle for Williams in writing *Paterson* was to determine what material, what content belonged to the poem and would help create its new form. The local histories, the newspaper articles, the documents of geography and American lore were required to anchor the personal documents and statements and to complete the Dionysian search for self through the Hell of anti-self.

The truly experimental, important American writers, from Whitman on, have known that autobiography *had* to be part of their work, had to be the core of the content out of which form might emerge and be newly embraced. Auden came to this country looking for the freedom which would make the use of personal, autobiographical material more possible. Eliot exiled himself so that he would never have to face it totally. Stevens, for all his magnificence, simply ignored the command and found his own oblique forms. Such a wide range of possibilities has been created in the past 50 years that there is a strong argument for our living in a Golden Age of Poetry, here in America; but the search does not seem any clearer, critically, than it was when Williams was facing the chagrin of Auden's success pitted against his own failures.

In Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*, a prose composition, an experimental autobiography, organized in short segments, as if they are the stanzas of a poem, there are a number of experiments being carried on. First of all, there is the serial use of the titles to each section, which recur (so far as I can tell) in random fashion throughout the book, but with great enough frequency that one begins to look for a numerical or metrical pattern, and this search itself constitutes a kind of awareness of form, for the reader. Secondly, the work is composed in sentence units, which remain intact throughout the work, but are used non-sequentially, and therefore create the effect of a composition which has a quantitative organization, orchestrated for performance; this is quite similar to the method and effect of many of John Cage's lectures. Thirdly, the work seems to proceed from the opposite of Creely's dictum, that is, that content is an extension of form, which creates the anti-sentimental effect of many choice personal statements given without the reader having

an emotional response to them. Finally, the work experiments with the traditional figurative and conceptual language of poetry (i.e. image, symbol, metaphor) while contradicting their effect by not allowing them to build either story or image. The narrative content of *My Life* is there, just as there is implied narrative in a Merce Cunningham dance composition. But, as with Cunningham's dances, the purpose is to divorce the viewer, reader, listener from this content, even from the implication of such content, so that he will perceive form as purely as possible.

Needless to say, this shifts every expectation of the reader, viewer. It makes an art that is hard to like but easy to admire. It makes an art that is frequently misunderstood, and even more frequently judged by the wrong standards. It is impossible to go to a Merce Cunningham dance concert and not occasionally feel fussy and bitchy. Why isn't there *ever* any music, any melody, any representative movement? The strain of looking and listening to pure form for several hours is enormous, even while exhilarating and challenging. The question is far beyond that of boredom; it has evolved to the resolution of tensions created by constantly expecting that formality to break, just for a moment, and show those old sentimental human traits—story telling, image making, the revelation of self.

It is hard for me, as a reader, even with the highest intentions and the greatest admiration for Hejinian's purity, her brilliance and her virtuoso performance not to long for more melody, story, autobiography in the work. Yet, she is unflinching in her formal resolutions, brave in her refusal to let *My Life* ever become a mere "autobiography." Her insights are dazzling:

> When what happens is not intentional, one can't ascribe meaning to it, and unless what happens is necessary, one can't expect it to occur again.
>
> (pp. 16-17)
>
> You are so generous, they told me, allowing everything in its place, but what we wanted to hear was a story.
>
> (p. 35)
>
> What memory is not a "gripping" thought.
>
> (this is one of the title and theme lines, which recurs)
>
> (pp. 33, 44, 53, 81)
>
> Continuity, not so much of ideas as of assumptions, or attitudes, a style one simply can't break away from.
>
> (p. 26)
>
> If it were writing we would have to explain.
>
> (p. 28)
>
> It isn't a small world, but there are many ways of dividing it into small parts.
>
> (p. 59)
>
> It seemed that we had hardly begun and we were already there, watching people for an instant framed in windows, never finding out

what happens to them, or what they mean.

(p. 77)

Any work dealing with questions of possibility must lead to new work.

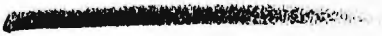
(p. 46)

And of course what I have just quoted is some of the structural and emotional rationale for Hejinian's composition, as well as a penetrating insight into how we experience the world as opposed to how we wish to experience the world.

In thinking about *My Life*, I often came to the conclusion that this book would be wonderfully suitable for one of those if-you-could-only-take-three-books-with-you-to-a-desert-island contests, for in searching for such books—surely the dictionary would be one of them—one would look for something he would not tire of, after many readings, for one which would give him wisdom and accomplishment on many different levels, one which would not tell the same old story, show the same old face, each time read. Precisely the many aspects of *My Life* which would make a short-term reader turn it aside for something more entertaining, for something with richer surface emotions, for more "content," would give the book an enormous power and delight in our lonely desert island reading. Still, most of us do not live on desert islands. And our reading need not be reduced to such austere books. Hejinian's experiment with a work whose content is an extension of form, and whose form is so pure, will leave many serious readers, along with the bad readers, longing for something which she has deliberately not allowed to be there.

To my taste, the explorations which come out of the opposite idea, "form is an extension of content" (the many voices of *Paterson*, the lyrically autobiographical anguish in portions of *The Maximus Poems* and *Paterson*, the "sentimental" emotional journeys of Ginsberg) are more American, thus preferable to the formalist, European tradition so brilliantly experimented with by Hejinian. This preference will always turn me away from Ashbery to Bukowski, from Eliot to Williams, from Ammons to Levertov. I would not be an honest reader if I did not admit as much.

—*Diane Wakoski*



MINE: the one that enters the stories
CLARK COOLIDGE
Berkeley: The Figures. 1982

Several years ago during an all-night session, Clark said to me, "What people don't

understand is that I'm interested in building a syntax, not destroying one." Regarding the history of the work in this light reveals an extraordinary consistency of focus. The earliest morphemic topologies (*Ing, Space*) function as elemental testings of an alternative perceptual order. Attention is drawn in two directions, outward toward the spatial junctures and margins, and inward toward the smallest units of meaning, prefixes, inflectional forms, etc... Words are isolated, fragmented, partially erased. Some pages read as the remains of a lost text, others as tentative disruptions of an underlying silence. All call for a determinedly participatory reading to yield their levels of referential signification. As an example, the opening poem of *Ing*:

these
ing
those

one

(It should be noted that this covers an entire page, the literal field of the event.)

At first the text confronts you with a perfect opacity – no "speaker," no "tone," no "story". It announces absolutely to true believers in Robert's (Penn Warren's) Rules of Order that they've just come through the wrong door. For those willing to continue reading, however, a number of interesting relational threads will make themselves evident. Near the top of the page we find a cluster of three units, the two alliterative ones either separated or conjoined by a partial sign, a terminal verbal inflection. Combinatorial events begin to suggest themselves: these mean-ing those? these lov-ing those? these wanting those? these leav-ing those? (etc.) As printed, at some point we notice that the "o-n-e" has also been implanted (reading upward) in the unit of three. Is this a matter of chance or intention? Are we facing a text which suddenly appears considerably less arbitrary? What is being said of the relationship between the isolate "one" and the clustered three? Why the vast space between? What is its prosodic and semantic function? Is this almost silent page actually charged with a variety of potential or inchoate meanings? The "ing" becomes a site of speculation, like a Sapphic remnant surrounded by its missing words. In a sense we are brought face to face with words and their constituent parts *as such* and are forced to ask basic questions about discourse, temporal and spatial organization, narrative frames. As in Webern we are offered the opportunity to reconsider the means of composition and the role of juncture, duration, theme, number. Throughout as well, there is humor and an evident delight in the improvisatory aspect of the work. (Wherever the referential aspect of the sign is brought into question, anxiety may result, but also laughter at the incongruities– *vide* Magritte, Stein, Beckett, Keaton, Tzara, Herriman's Krazy Kat.)

With *Mine*, a decade and a half later, the space has filled itself in. A sufficiently flexible instrument has been designed to meet broader demands of statement and ex-

pression. It is an ideal place to begin to read Coolidge, or to read him anew, given its range of concerns and wealth of materials. All the recurrent themes are present, and the working itself remains a central source of wonder. As with *Own Face* (1978), the paradox of identity and the "personal" is foregrounded: how do the immediate "surrounds" transform themselves into a voice that is at once "mine" and "not-mine"? What is an immediate environment? To chart this, Coolidge focuses both on the objects in his study—of study—and the various concerns that also inform one's working. Echoes of Coolidge's personal sources, Kafka, Kerouac, Proust, Beckett, et al, appear here much closer to the surface than in most of his other work. There are the materials—the cat, the dust, the typewriter, toilet, heating ducts. And there are the various hints and quotes from Creeley, O'Hara, Melville, Stevens. These "quotes" often appear and disappear suddenly, as in a Dexter Gordon or Charlie Parker solo. They do in fact seem to function more "musically" than "literarily," as a layering of the harmonic structure. There are also tantalizingly "straightforward" interjections:

> How much I do owe to one Philip Whalen Esq. of Oregon,
> Kyoto and San Francisco.

Often however, the most apparently direct voice represents another level of projection or parody:

> I must tell you that in its entirety I cannot fill in the
> landscape of my own background. Great gulfs exist that I can
> plumb exactly with resonant pendula but cannot describe. Even
> the letters comprising my name seem to me divided by such gaps,
> each one at variance with the rest in its extent. Too, each
> letter is sounded differently, as if by different instruments,
> making up a klangfarbenmelodie. Each one of my works attempts
> to reproduce this nominal effect, but seen in such a glaring light
> they all must be taken as failures. Perhaps at the last I
> myself will more perfectly come to resemble my name.

This both is and is not CC speaking—the voice is slightly off, deliberately stylised in fond parody of modernist first-person narrative fiction. It is closer to a mapping operation than to the confessional-expressionist mode.

Mine can be read as an extension of Coolidge's most persistent metaphor, the geological. Language, he would seem to be saying, is layered with its own history, imbedded with chance events. Its texture is now crystalline, refractive, now conglomerate, now granitic. All writing is simultaneously a reading of this information, a continual process of descent and resurfacing, fraught with immediate and necessary risks.

—Michael Palmer

Sir:

I am writing to offer my thought on a few blurry patches in the generally clear commentary on my work contained in the composite review by Jed Rasula, published in your issue number 7. Your reviewer excels in his orientating of his judgement of my work to the acquaintance with it he has established. But there is some color of women's-studies in the clarity, and some shadows thrown upon this clarity by a discipline of plain literature-studies sophistication to redress any special-studies imbalance of emphasis. The courage to look at my work itself squarely—the resultant clarity of vision—is overtaken by professional critical discretion Stereotype references, phraseology, animadversions, figure though very limitedly, in the review, as supportive of the reviewer's integrity of judgement: no literarily erratic partiality, here.

The point about resentment of my poetic work as "over-cerebral" is well-made. (The editor of an English anthology of some time ago justified his exclusion of it, to a complainant, on that ground—condemning it as "too cerebral.") But your reviewer indulges this morbid literarily conventional attitude to thought as a natural element of poetic speaking in his characterization of me as "a relentless and aggressive intellect." Such adjectives—apart from the menace attaching to the name "intellect" for "working mind"—have been part of a build-up of myself as a fierce, unpleasant character, overbearing, destructive. They are untrue of me as an "intellect" and "character" both. My thought does not operate under a load of aggressive motivation and indifference to injuring effect. This is shoddy terminology in the midst of a generally honorable exposition of sympathy with the course of my thought and work. Then, there is an ugly display by the reviewer of peacemaking with an ordinary disposition of literary unfairness to my poetic work in offered acknowledgement of provocation in it to a certain resentment against some of my procedures. No identifying substantiation is provided for this dig of generous spirit towards detractors of it on the part of a defender of it. The spirit immediately swells itself into a characterization of some of my poems (no indication as to which, and where) so nastily contemptuous as to suggest a feminist show of capability of matching or bettering what the reviewer has called "male indignance" towards me. And this ecstasy of demonstration of powers of ordinary literature-studies judgement-poise takes the reviewer reeling into a sentence of denunciation of my preface to a 1930 book of poems of mine as the work of an imbecile, brain-touched with echo-impressions of Winnie the Pooh light-reading wit and of Heidegger and Gertrude Stein brought into lugubriously senseless nightmare conjunction. A certain utterance of the preface goads the reviewer to join Rilke to Heidegger as collaborative prompter of the aberrations of the preface. The preface was not the

work of an empty - head flooded with scraps of chaotically assimilated literary and ontological sophistication in contemporary currency. It was a greeting upon my return from almost-death to life *and* poetry. I believe that anyone of unqualifiedly serious concern with my thought, my writing, poetic and other, would have consigned understanding and judgement of that preface to a labor of learning before letting fly such self-confident literary-man condescension-ese in the midst of so much independent-spirited writing on me.

The shadow of a sense of necessities of mingling literary-studies orientations with basic direct orientation to my thought and writings plays tricks with the aim of basic identification of my work's concerns and directions. Heidegger and Rilke and I are no more affiliated literarily or ontologically than are Wallace Stevens and I "twins." It is to no point of comprehension of my thought whether or not I now know or "ever knew" of Heidegger's writing. His squeezing poetry into his Germanic-thoroughness efforts to isolate human identity, and to formulate a linguistic anatomy of thought, are all an externalistic enterprise on the outside of the reality of sentient existence—and the reality of thought, and of language, and of human identity. Neither has Rilke connection with my poetic position of general thought-positions. His ultimate transcendance-point of angelicism lies in a private realm of his masculinist own, as does the Stevens' sublime.

Finally, to comment on your reviewer's attributing to me an unwillingness to indicate by way of example what the "proper use" of the poetic faculty is. I did write on the "poetic faculties" in the preface to my *Collected Poems* of 1938. But in the 1980 preface and elsewhere in that edition, I make it clear (as elsewhere) that these faculties are a version of linguistic faculties committed to kinds of linguistic use intended to surmount obstructions to perfect propriety of utterance in the constraints of ordinary speaking urgency. I believe that my friends give me credit for at least not leaving poetry to flounder in unfulfillment—a relentless abandoner of it—and preoccupying myself in moralistic aggressiveness with "right" linguistic use exclusively. I think they, all variously, have reservations in their ideas as to just what I am up to (and was up to), according to special orientations of their own. I do my best to enable all who care to be clear about me to be as clear as I can help them to be, but I forgive much of what I recognize as exhaustion of the immediate circumstantial possibilities of understanding and sympathy. I forgive your reviewer for what I have identified here as a strategy of mingling some critical unfriendliness with the friendliness. My thanks with good humor, for everything stout-hearted in the review; I have found a good deal.

Respectfully, I am
Laura (Riding) Jackson

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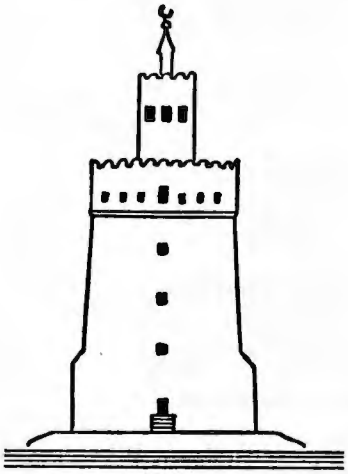

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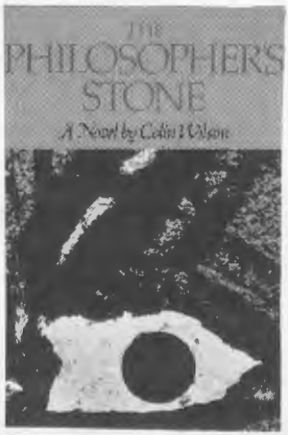

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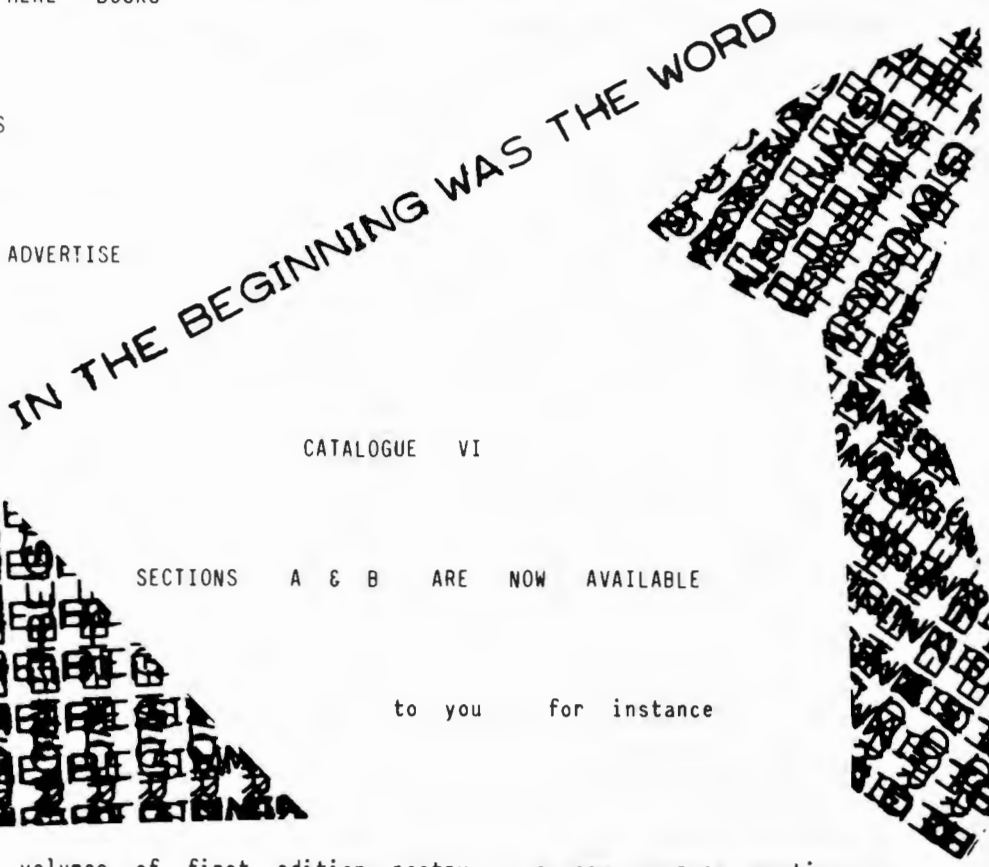

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